BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

JUNE 1954

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BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

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by GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

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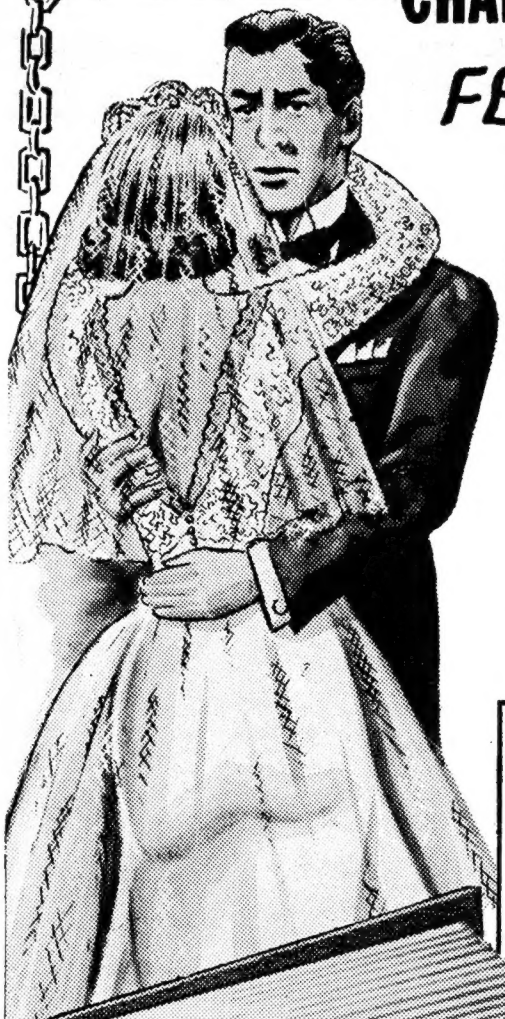

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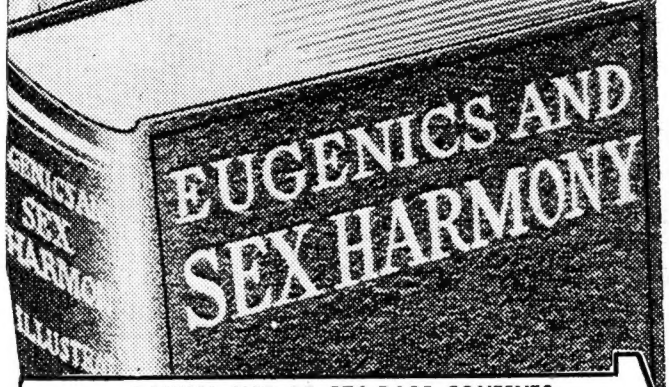

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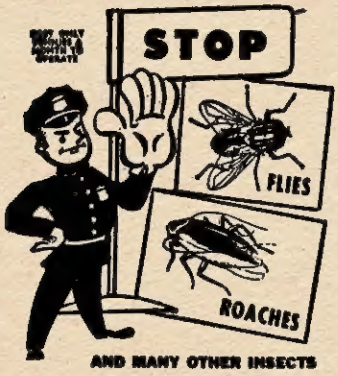

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BIG ROMANCES OF THE WEST

VOLUME 55 JUNE, 1954 NUMBER 1

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RIDER FROM HELL ..... *Frank H. Bennett* 12
Beautiful Stella Bennett had to choose between the nester, Tommy Dean who wanted to love her more than he wanted to live—and bullets of rancher gunmen.

DEATH RIDES CLOSE ..... *Frank P. Castle* 56
It took a hundred blood-crazed Comanches, and the gleam of a white shoulder through the willows to show Wayne Tilman that the honkatonk girl was the one he wanted.

TUMBLEWEED DARLING ..... *Cliff Farrell* 76
Had Jay Tallant sunk too low to fight for—and win—the beautiful wildcat who saved his life?
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It was a trail of bloodshed, and it came quickly to its inevitable end.

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NO MAN'S WOMAN ..... *Talmage Powell* 39
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WILDERNESS WILDCAT ..... *Robert L. Trimnell* 49
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TWO GIRL MAN ..... *Zeta Rothschild* 72
Of the two women in Harry Tracy's life, one died in his arms, and the other celebrated his death.

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★ Star Feature ★

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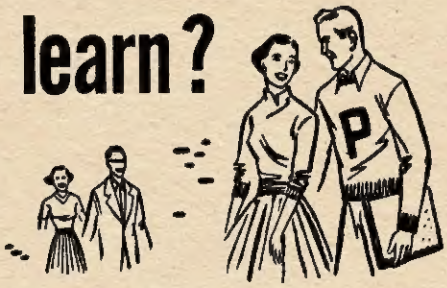

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End of Two Cowboys

By David Crewe

It was a trail of blood that came quickly to its inevitable end.

CHARLES LA DUE and his wife Florence were closing their grocery store, the Payn-Tekit, late one Saturday night after an exceptionally hard day. For in addition to the usual week-end bargains, they had run a special sale at ten cents an item. And the LaDues and their staff were glad the day was over.

As Charles and his wife left by the front door for their car parked in front of the store on Phoenix North Central Avenue, the four clerks made for the back door, their last duty to see that it was securely locked.

Just as the couple got into their machine, a Ford sedan slithered in front of them blocking their way, and two men in *sombreros,* tight-fitting trousers and high-heeled cowboy boots stepped out and hurried back to the LaDue car and yanked open the door.

"Get out and open up the safe for us," said the older bandit, who was evidently in charge of operations.

With a gun pressing into his side Charles LaDue was about to obey when three of the clerks emerged from the alley that led from the street to the back door.

The three young men stopped at the curb to light cigarettes. They glanced at the car, saw the man standing at the open door and thought nothing of it. But the bandit at the car got impatient and turned to his friend.

"Keep your gun on LaDue while I take care of those punks," he ordered.

Then he strode over to the three young clerks, tapped one of them on the shoulder. "You would hang around," he said, "and now you're in it. Get back into the store."

With his gun nudging them, one by one, he herded them to the door of the store.

Then the second bandit ordered LaDue from the car and made him unlock the front door. Inside, the three clerks were locked in a storage room in the rear while LaDue was told to open the safe.

Florence LaDue in the meantime, had fainted and slumped to the floor of the car.

What the bandits didn't know was that there was a fourth clerk. Back in the alley was Owen Moore for whom the other clerks had waited at the curb. Moore, who had been about to come out of the alley just as the two bandits herded LaDue and the others back into the grocery store, quickly shrank into the shadows.

Then he turned and ran back through the alley to the opposite end, also open, to a cross street. A few minutes later a message was being broadcast to patrol cars that a holdup was taking place at the LaDue grocery.

Back in the store the two bandits were

(Continued on page 8)

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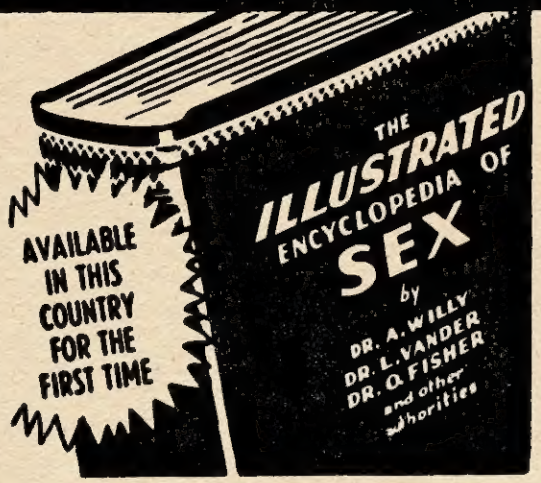

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(Continued from page 6)

anxiously watching LaDue fumble with the safe lock. Finally he got it open. Prodded by the gun of the older bandit, he pulled out a canvas bag crammed with dimes. He was so nervous that as he was about to hand it over it slipped from his grasp. Dimes scattered over the floor.

The younger bandit began to scoop up the coins. But the older one wasn't interested. "The bills, the bills?" he demanded. "Don't stall." The unhappy LaDue had no choice. The younger bandit had earlier jumped on a table and turned on a dim bulb in the ceiling. And in its flickering light the other began counting up the bundles of bills that LaDue reluctantly brought out from an inner compartment of the safe.

WHILE the three men were clustered round the safe, they were startled by a deep voice booming, "Hands Up!"

At the door stood Officer Frank Blist of a volunteer citizens' police patrol. He was just a short distance from the grocery when the message came over his car radio, and was the first to arrive at the scene.

The younger bandit stood between the safe and the officer. Knowing he would be the target, he dropped the bag of dimes and raised his arms high over his head.

As Bliss approached, LaDue screamed a warning: "there's another bandit—watch out, he's armed."

A gun spat even as LaDue spoke. The first bullet crashed into the plate glass window back of Bliss. The second shot tore off the middle finger of his right hand and the third, in his chest, sent him reeling. The bullet had pierced his heart.

"Get out, Kid?" screamed the older bandit. For now, coming nearer, he could hear the screaming siren of a police car.

With a running jump the younger man crashed through another window, to the sidewalk, and in half a minute was in the Ford sedan and away.

By now the police car had arrived. Its occupants stopped long enough to fire at the fleeing car. But it had too good a start.

Into the grocery store went the three officers headed by Patrolman Harry Maddux. They were met by a barrage of bullets. Then silence. And a gun, empty of bullets, was thrown at the electric bulb dangling from the ceiling, smashing it.

The bandit, unarmed, decided to make a dash for it. In the dark, with the officers hesitating to shoot lest they kill one of their own, he thought he had a chance.

Butting his way against one man, he made a flying leap over the body of Bliss just inside the door. But the high heels of his cowboy boots caught on the coat of the dead man, and he stumbled. Silhoutted against the light he was a perfect target. And bullets from three guns sent him sprawling, dead, on the pavement.

The battle was over. Officer Frank Bliss was dead. And so was one of the bandits.

The next day the dead bandit was identified. He was Leonard Bloodworth, better known to thousands of rodeo fans in Arizona and Texas as Tex. For ten years he had been an outstanding hero in the roping of steers, riding unbroken broncs, and the like. He had won many prizes. Then he had retired to run his own ranch. And back to Colorado, Texas, his widow, Marie, took his body.

Marie Bloodworth knew nothing of her husband's plan. But she admitted that his companion was Arlon Fox, ten years his junior. He, too, was known in rodeo circles but was never the star Tex had been. He came from the cattle country in northern Texas.

Fox had abandoned the Ford sedan outside Phoenix. The glass was shattered, the roof and sides spattered with bullet holes. But the young man had escaped unscathed.

It wasn't going to be easy to run down young Fox. He might have taken refuge with some old friends who were unaware

(Continued on page 10)

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CASE NO. 4. Girl, aged 6 years. Wet bed since infancy. Nervous, irritable. DRY-TABS formula administered for regular period. BED-WETTING stopped almost immediately. Slight relapse. Formula administered again. Child responded immediately once more, and history reveals no further relapse.

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(Continued from page 8)

of his recent exploit in Phoenix. But the trail led to the north, and it was decided that Sheriff Lon Jordon of Maricopa County should take over the job.

And with Deputy Sheriff Ernest Roach, Jordon set out for northern Arizona.

The trail led to Prescott where the Fox family had once lived, and where Arlon still had many friends, any one of whom might give him shelter, or perhaps, know where he could be located.

After eliminating many possibilities, it was decided Fox was hiding out on a ranch near Dewey. If barricaded in a house, a gun fight was inevitable. And Jordon decided it was up to him to take that risk.

Roach didn't like being left behind. But orders were orders. And after seeing Jordon off, he decided to pass the time in a saloon where they could talk of many old-timers who knew the Fox family.

Because Roach had shown an interest, one of the men began talking of the days when Fox was a boy. Only he referred to Bill. Roach quickly learned that Arlon, loathing the name, had encouraged his friends to call him Bill.

This news gave the officer an idea. If he could only reach Jordon in time to prevent his stopping at the ranch where they were pretty certain Fox was hiding, they might make an arrest without bloodshed.

But the question was, how to reach Jordon. Roach knew the route he was taking. But, discovered, on inquiring, that the only ranch Jordon passed on the way did not have a telephone.

But Roach wasn't stumped.

And Jordon half-way, saw a man wildly waving to him. "You're wanted back in Prescott right away. Your friend Roach says it's urgent," the man told him.

NO, THE message hadn't come by telephone—the rancher didn't have one. But the local radio station had broken its usual routine to send out a call asking the rancher to intercept Jordan and give him the message.

Back in Prescott, Roach and Jordon worked out their plan. One of Fox's old friends lived near Dewey—that was where Jordon had been heading. Another, they knew, was living in an auto court outside Prescott. If they could get Fox out of the ranch, it would be much easier to arrest him.

This was their strategy. They sent the friend at the auto court a telegram persuading the operator to headline it Colorado, Texas, where Marie Bloodworth lived. The message urged that he take Bill in and look after him until she could get to Prescott. The telegram was signed "Marie Bloodworth."

The use of the name "Bill" made the telegram sound authentic. Jordan and Roach watching from a distance saw a young man set out on a bicycle. And after waiting a while they took the same road and stopped their car at a narrow turning.

It wasn't too long before they saw the car they awaited coming along, the bicycle perched in the back, and three men sitting together in the front seat.

As the machine took the turn slowly, Jordan stepped out, gun in hand.

"Fox, you'd better come along with me," he said quietly.

The other men, as well as Fox, were too stunned to move.

Jordan came close and spoke again. "I want your gun," he said and reached over the door and pulled it from Fox's pocket.

Fox shrugged his shoulders. This was the end, he knew. And he meekly got out of the machine and, handcuffed, took his place between Jordan and Roach.

The defense pleaded that Fox, the younger by ten years, had been influenced by Tex Bloodworth. Also, that his had not been the gun that killed Officer Bliss. And in consideration of these facts, the jury gave him a sentence of only twenty-five years.

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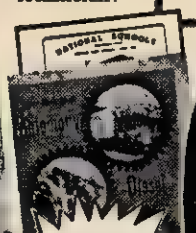

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Rider From Hell

By Frank H. Bennett

Beautiful Stella Bennett had to choose between the nester, Tommy Dean, who wanted to love her more than he wanted to live—and the rancher gunmen who swore to give him a chance to prove he meant it.

Crouching beside a boulder, he watched the riders.

TOMMY DEAN pulled his big roan to a halt at the crest of a high ridge, and below him lay the old familiar landmarks of the basin country. White fishbacks of rocks reared their heads like ragged tombstones at the foot of the tall butte. The flatlands along Elk Creek and the thick growth of pines, spruce and aspens that

followed the creek's windings and bordered small lush meadows brought a tightness to Tommy's throat. He frowned and began to build a smoke, a tall, brown-faced, flat-waisted young man, with big hands and wide shoulders.

"The same as it was five years ago when I stopped here for a last look," he muttered.

Five years ago, he'd been a scared kid of eighteen, running away. But now he was back, and, thinking of why he had come back, he wondered if maybe he wasn't a bit of a fool.

First, there was the impossible dream. And second—well, he wasn't too sure about that—maybe to prove he was no longer afraid. But it was a scrap of paper that prompted him to come back now, this year, this very month in mid-summer. And digging into a pocket, he found the newspaper clipping and read it again.

There wasn't much to it—just a short item that said a rancher by the name of Pat Patterson had either jumped or fallen from a high trail. Suicide or an accident, it said.

Frowning, Tommy stuffed the clipping back into his pocket. He glanced toward the purple ridge of mountains to the west and north and a great bluff that walled the basin in on the south. It was from the trail that climbed the wall that old Pat Patterson had fallen to his death.

"Let's go, Sandy," the young man said.

But the roan lifted his head and snorted. Turning to the right, Tommy saw the two horsemen. They had ridden up unnoticed from a deep gully, and, although he had not seen either man for almost five years, he knew them instantly. They recognized him. He could tell that by the way they pulled up short and stared at him and at his roan horse—at the sixgun dangling against his hip.

"I'll be damned!" the man on the left exclaimed. He was a big, heavy-shouldered man with small dark eyes, and a black stubble over his heavy jowls and flabby chin. His name was Marty Vail, Tommy remembered. He owned the Box V, and he was one of the ranchers who did not like farmers.

The second man, small, spare, thin-faced, stared at Tommy out of gray, sun-squinted eyes. Owner of the Lazy L, Biff Lewis was another rancher who had no use for farmers.

"Tommy Dean, as sure as I live!" he said.

Both men wore guns. They'd dropped their right hands to within inches of the holsters. They were not sure what Tommy was doing here in the basin country. Smiling faintly, he rested his hands on the saddle horn.

The men relaxed slightly. Biff Lewis tipped his hat back on his graying hair and let a sour grin twist at his thin mouth.

"You wouldn't be back here to farm, would you?" he asked.

"Could be," Tommy answered quietly. "I still own my dad's land along the creek."

Marty Vail scowled, and a flush stole into his ugly face.

"Things ain't changed around here none since you left," he said in a hard, flat voice. "It's still ranch country."

"Maybe you've come to find who killed your pa?" Lewis said, squinting sharply at Tommy. "If that's it, I'm on your side. But if you've come back to farm—"

"Thanks, Biff," Tommy said. His lean brown face had tightened. "I don't think there's much chance finding out who murdered my father after five years."

He turned his back on the men and rode on toward Elk Creek. His memories were all bitter now.

At first, the ranchers hadn't objected much to the four families who had bought the land along the creek. But, when they'd learned that a large settlement was soon to follow, they had become alarmed and angry.

Words led to trouble. Fences were cut. Cattle overran fields. A group of mysterious

night-riders swept down out of the foothills, setting a few fires. But the farmers had stuck it out until the night John Dean had died with a bullet through his back. Their leader gone, the farmers had fled in terror—all but Tommy and his bereaved mother.

At the time of his father's death, his mother had been too ill to travel. If it hadn't been for Pat Patterson, who took them into his ranch home on the Triangle, Tommy could only guess what might have happened to him and his mother. But old Pat had been kind. Again Tommy thought of the clipping, and of the impossible dream.

The rancher had a daughter, Stella. She'd cried a little when Tommy and his mother had at last left the Triangle. Once she had held her soft, red mouth to his, and he had kissed her. . . . The bitterness went from his young face. He lifted his eyes and saw that he had reached the timber along the creek.

HE CROSSED a meadow, remembering that here had been a cornfield. The fences were all gone, but a few posts staggered along a narrow ridge. He rode through another strip of pines and came out into a weed-choked clearing.

The old, two room log house, a stone chimney at one end, still stood facing the gentle slope to the creek. It had been his home, and again a tightness filled his throat.

Sliding to the ground, he walked into the doorless cabin. A startled owl flapped from a dark corner and blundered out through a hole in the roof. His mother's rusty range still stood in the kitchen, but the pipe was gone. Remembering, Tommy stumbled a little blindly back to his horse and removed his bedroll and gear.

Darkness was sweeping in from the timber. He was tired from five long days of riding. Tonight he would camp outside. Tomorrow was soon enough to consider ways and means of making the cabin livable if he decided to stay here. But, just as he stepped toward the cabin, a shot rang out.

It came from the timber behind him, the bullet whistling high above his head. He dropped the bedroll and flattened himself against the log wall.

His heart hammering, his gun in hand, he waited for the gunman's next move. There was no second shot. No sound, except the faint whisper of a small summer breeze through the trees.

At last, crouching low, he moved through the weeds to the timber. Suddenly, from the distance, came the sounds of hoofbeats. He stood with his back against a silver spruce until the sounds had died away.

Somebody's either a poor shot, or didn't aim to hit me, he thought. Either way, I reckon it's my first invitation to move on.

His face grim, he returned to the old cabin and made camp for the coming night.

The next morning, Tommy Dean was poking about the log walls with a knife and finding them solid, when the sound of an approaching horse made him turn and drop his hand to his gun. A dappled gray horse came into view, his head held proudly high. Then Tommy saw the rider, a girl; and suddenly his heart was beating too fast. The rider was Stella Patterson.

She saw him and smiled. The sun touched the string of golden freckles across her straight nose, her red mouth, and the shower of honey-gold hair that fell loosely about her slim shoulders.

"Hello, Tommy," she said. "Biff Lewis came by the Triangle last evening and said you were back."

She slid to the ground, her dark skirt swirling about her trim ankles. She stepped toward him, holding out a hand in a friendly manner. She hadn't changed much. She was still small and willowy, still as clean and lovely as he remembered her, though more grown up, of course, more sure of herself.

"It's nice to see you again," she said, and he knew by her voice and the lights in her eyes that she meant it. But almost in the

same breath, she added, "Tommy, why did you come back?"

He looked at her, the sudden worry in her frown, the tiny wrinkles in the fine clear skin about her blue eyes. He thought of his impossible dream—what chance did a man like him have to win a girl like her? He thought of the notion he'd had when he'd read the newspaper clipping—that perhaps he could repay his debt to her father by being of some help to her.

He grinned and said, "Thought I ought to look over my land."

He knew that she was thinking of the old trouble between the ranchers and the farmers, that his return might in some way bring trouble back to the basin country.

"Tell me, Tommy," she said, smiling again, "what have you been doing with yourself these past few years?"

He told her about the jobs he'd held here and there, working on ranches, running a feed store.

"And how's your mother?" she asked.

"She died a year ago."

"I'm sorry," she said. "Have you heard about my dad?"

He nodded. "I'm sorry about that, Stella. He didn't like farmers any better than the others, but he was good to mother and me."

Their eyes met and fell away. They were both remembering those few weeks they had been together on the Triangle. Remembering and a little frightened at being alone for the first time in five years and a little uncertain of the future.

She swung her golden head and said, "I've got to be going, Tommy. I have some business to attend to in town."

"I'll ride in with you," he said, suddenly knowing what he was going to do. "I've got to see about buying some shingles and lumber."

"Then you're going to stay here?"

Her eyes met his again.

"It's my land," he went on doggedly. "It's home. Does my staying make us enemies, Stella?"

"Of course, not," she answered. "Anyway, I'm selling the Triangle. I'm leaving and—oh, Tommy!"

Before she could turn away, he saw the tears in her eyes. He stood there, knowing she was crying, not sure of what to do or say.

"Selling the Triangle?" he said at last.

Stella stopped trying to hide her crying from him. Brokenly, she told him the story. A few bad years. Cattle rustling throughout the basin country, wiping out the Triangle's meager profits. Debts that she had never known existed until after her father's death.

"Things are in a mess, Tommy," she said.

SHE'D had to let the Triangle cowhands go one at a time until now only old John Ash, the foreman, and his wife, Mary, were left. John could not do much riding any more. The banker in Fulton had found a buyer for the Triangle. By selling now, the girl could clean up the debts and have a little left.

"After you sell, then what are you going to do?" Tommy asked.

"Business college—an office job, I guess."

"Is that what you want to do, Stella?"

"No." She wiped her eyes and tried to smile. "This is my kind of country. It's my home, too, Tommy. I want to stay here, to keep the ranch. But some things are impossible."

"Yeah, I know," he said, thinking of his dream.

He caught his roan and saddled it, while Stella waited for him beside the cabin. They rode away from the creek in silence, turned east into the Fulton trail.

"I remember the Triangle as the best ranch in the basin," he said finally. "The best water. The best haylands. Do you have to sell now? Couldn't it be put off for a while?"

"Till next spring, perhaps. But—"

"Then put it off," he said. "Sell what cattle are ready for the fall market. Winter

feed the others and catch the spring market with them. By then—"

She stopped him with a shake of her head. "John and I simply can't do it alone, and there's no money to hire—" Suddenly she understood what he had in mind and shook her head again. "No, Tommy, I can't let you work all winter for me, taking a chance that you'll be paid in the spring."

He didn't try to explain about the debt he figured he owed because of her father's kindness. And, of course, he didn't mention the dream. He laughed and said this was the break he'd been looking for.

"Grub and a place to stay, while I fix up my cabin and rebuild fences in my spare time," he said. "Maybe by spring, things will look up. If they don't, so what? We've got everything to gain and nothing to lose, haven't we?"

He saw her smile, and, when she looked up at him, her eyes were bright with the beginning of a new hope. A quick lift of her chin told him that she had made up her mind.

"I'll hang on till spring," she said. "Maybe we can swing it, Tommy. Anyway, I'll tell Mr. Welsh that I've changed my mind about selling this fall."

"Welsh?" Tommy said, frowning. "I don't remember the name."

"Fred Welsh," she told him. "He came here about two years ago after buying controlling interest in the Fulton bank. He's helped me over some pretty rough spots and, when I decided to sell out, found a buyer for the ranch. Someone he'd known back in Denver."

She told him some about the cattle losses as they rode through the late morning sunshine. Riders would slip in from the foothills at night, striking unexpectedly, first one ranch and then another, running off a few steers at a time.

"Both Biff Lewis and Marty Vail, with the help of the outlying ranchers, have tried to stop it," she said. "But so far, they haven't accomplished anything."

"What's the matter with Lou Lund?" Tommy asked. "Or isn't he the sheriff now?"

"He does what he can," she answered.

They had come within sight of the small trail-end town.

"You haven't asked me about my dad's death," she said. "Would you like to know the details?"

"If you want to tell me," he said gently.

It had happened in early summer, she told him, her voice catching a little. Old Pat's body had been found at the foot of the south wall of the basin. He had been alone, on what mission no one knew. He had evidently ridden along the switchback trail that led along the face of the wall and had fallen to his death from the last turn at the top.

"He'd been worried," she said. "I know now that cattle losses and his debts were troubling him. But I'm sure he didn't—jump. He wasn't the kind to give up, Tommy. I think he must have had a fainting spell and fallen from his horse."

"You've never given any mind to murder?" he asked. "Like being pushed from the trail?"

She stared at him for a long moment. Slowly she shook her head. "He had no enemies that I know of," she said.

NOW they were riding along the narrow rutted street between a scattering of false-fronted buildings. A stage coach came rattling in at the other end of the street, raising a cloud of gray dust. It halted in front of the post office.

"Why did you ask me, Tommy?" the girl said.

"Murder has been done in the basin country before," he said. "Five years ago."

They dismounted and left their horses at the rail in front of the bank. Tommy watched the girl climb the steps to the bank and go in. Then he let his gaze drift along the familiar street.

Sheriff Lou Lund stood by the doorway

to his office, a little heavier and older looking than Tommy remembered him. Hitching up his belt, the young man crossed through the thick dust, stepped up on the boardwalk, and gave the old man a grin.

No answering grin came to the sheriff's round, red face.

"Heard you was back, Tommy," he said, sighing. He was old and tired and disliked trouble. "Never expected to see you here again after what happened," he added.

"I still own some land along Elk Creek," Tommy said.

"Hope you don't aim to start up farmin', boy."

"No law against it, is there?"

"No." The sheriff sighed again. "But one farmer brings another, and the first thing you know—" He let it go at that.

"Sooner or later," Tommy said, "the farmers will come. Not by twos and threes, but by the dozens. It's in the cards, Sheriff, and there's no stopping it."

Sheriff Lund nodded in agreement. Tommy was right, and he knew it. But he also knew there would be bloodshed before the valley lands were broken by the plow.

"That kind of talk around here could get you in bad trouble, son."

Turning heavily, he went back into his office.

Tommy circled the block and returned to his horse. He was building a smoke when Stella stepped from the bank, followed by a thin, white-haired man dressed in a black suit, white silk shirt, and a string tie.

"Tommy, I want you to meet Mr. Welsh," Stella said.

Tommy shook hands with the dried-up banker. He was a sharp-eyed man in his early fifties. His fingers felt cold and clammy.

"So you're the young man who's going to help Stella and John Ash through the winter," he murmured. "Well, I hope she's doing the right thing. But I don't know. By next spring, I many not be able to find a buyer for the Triangle."

Shaking his head worriedly, the little man went back into the bank.

CHAPTER TWO

Farmers Ain't Wanted!

A FEW minutes later, Tommy and Stella rode from Fulton. Coming to the first fork in the trail, they parted. Tommy followed the left-hand trail, which led toward the creek and the old cabin where he'd left his gear. Stella rode straight to the west, cutting across the basin toward the Triangle. When she came to the crest of a hill, she turned and waved, and Tommy waved back. Then she was gone, and he spurred his roan into a canter.

"If I'd had sense enough to've brought my stuff along," he growled, "it would have saved us a long, lonely ride, Sandy."

He was almost a mile from the creek when he saw the smoke rising into the clear blue sky. Even if he couldn't see for the trees, he knew what was burning and spurred Sandy into a run. He broke into the clearing just as the roof of the blazing cabin caved in, sending a shower of sparks into the still air.

He'd left his gear tied to a tree limb. A quick glance showed that it was gone.

Then he saw the piece of paper fastened to a stake that had been driven into the ground. He crossed over and read the scrawled words: *Farmers ain't wanted!*

His anger mounting, he swung into the saddle and headed toward the creek.

"Likely somebody left a trail, Sandy," he muttered.

But before the roan had taken a dozen steps, four riders burst into the clearing. Tommy had never seen the men before.

"Saw smoke and thought we'd ride over to see what was burnin'," a big, burly redhead said. He looked hard at Tommy out of cold, narrowed eyes. "You start that fire, stranger?"

They were a tough-looking lot. Two of

them threatened him with their sixguns.

"Don't think I'd burn my own home, do you?" Tommy retorted.

They laughed and closed in on him. They took his gun and pulled him from the saddle.

"Got to learn you not to go startin' fires," the red-head said.

Two men caught Tommy by the arms. The red-head smashed a fist into his face, and the sudden burst of pain made Tommy gasp. The red-head laughed and struck again.

Tommy did what he could to protect himself, which wasn't much. The men didn't knock him out. They wanted him to feel every blow. They knew how to hurt a man. At last, when they were through with him, they swung into their saddles and sat for a time, laughing down at him where he lay on the ground, twisting with pain.

"Reckon he'll think twice before he starts any more fires," the red-head said. "Let's go, boys."

For a long time, Tommy lay there, while the flames died and the ashes began to cool. Then at last, he found enough strength to crawl on down to the creek.

The coolness of the water helped. He splashed it over his bruised and bleeding face and arms. Finally he stumbled to his feet and staggered back to the smouldering ruins. He found his gun and his hat and then had to lie down again.

Eventually he managed to catch his horse and climb into the saddle. An hour after dark, he rode into the Triangle yard. That was the last thing he remembered until he opened his eyes and found himself in bed.

In the yellow lamplight, faces swung dizzily about him. With an effort, he brought them into focus. Old John Ash, and his wife, Mary, were looking down at him out of frightened eyes. Then he saw Stella. Her face was as white as death.

"I'm all right," he said, trying to grin.

HE AWOKE next morning, feeling sore and stiff. But, otherwise, he was in pretty good shape. He got up and dressed, wincing some at the pain in his joints. He went down to breakfast, ate Mary Ash's griddle cakes, eggs, and sausage, and felt much better. Stella came in as he was finishing a last cup of coffee.

She grinned at the sight of his battered face. But inwardly, she was furious about the assault. At her request, he described the four men as best he could.

"I think you ran into some of the Box V outfit," she said. "Marty Vail has expanded his range to the north. He's brought in some new hands. They're wild and plenty tough."

"Reckon I found that out," Tommy said, grinning back at her.

"What are you going to do about it?"

Looking at her, he saw the deep worry in her eyes.

"What do you want me to do?"

"The sheriff ought to know about the burning of the cabin," she said slowly. "And about the attack on you, too. I think you should go talk with Lou Lund."

He knew that she wanted him to stay away from Vail. She was afraid for him.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll go talk to Lund."

Presently he limped out into the morning sunshine and found old John oiling the hinges on the yard gate. The oldster also thought the wise thing to do was to talk with the sheriff.

"I don't know what Lou can do about it," John said. "But one thing's for sure, you can't lick the Box V crew single-handed. And I'd bet my last dime that that red-headed coyote is Vail's new foreman, Red Anderson."

Tommy arrived in Fulton just before noon. Again he left his horse at the rail in front of the bank and walked over to the sheriff's office. Old Lou Lund sat behind his battered desk. But he wasn't alone. A half-smoked cigar stuck between his thick

lips, Marty Vail sat near an open window.

"Come on in, Tommy," the sheriff said coldly. "Marty's just told me what happened yesterday. He feels right bad about it, even if you did start the ruckus."

Glancing at Vail, Tommy saw the faint grin on his face. He knew then that the rancher had outmaneuvered him, that coming here had been a waste of time and effort.

"It don't take much to get some of my cowhands stirred up," Vail said. "You shouldn't of tried to blame that fire on 'em, Tommy."

"Wait a minute," Tommy said angrily. "I didn't accuse them of anything. They blamed the fire on me and—"

"That ain't the way Red and the others told it," Vail cut in stonily. "They said they saw smoke and rode over to investigate. You cussed 'em out and said they'd set fire to your cabin. Then you jumped Joe Hooker, him bein' the smallest of the boys. Of course, the boys couldn't help batting you around some when they pulled you off Joe."

The big man held a flaming match to his cigar.

"As for settin' fire to the cabin, no way knowin' who did that. Likely some rustlers who holed up in your cabin and got careless."

"I don't like it no way you look at it, Tommy," Sheriff Lund spoke up angrily. "You comin' back to this country with a chip on your shoulder. Startin' trouble with the first batch of cowhands you—"

But Tommy had had enough. Turning on his heel, he stamped out into the noon sunshine. The beating and the burning had been well planned, he realized now. Perhaps Vail had the backing of the other ranchers, Tommy didn't know for sure. But one thing he did know, the ranchers did not intend to let farming get started in the basin country again. He had not come back here to farm, but it would be hard to convince anyone of that. Before heading back to the Triangle, he stopped at a restaurant and ate a late dinner all alone.

Riding through the basin, his thoughts were bitter. Crossing through a jungle of boulders in a deep gully, he was jerked up short by the blast of a gun. The bullet fanned past, ricocheted off a flat rock, and went whining into the air.

Clawing at his gun, he flung himself from the saddle and rolled into the protection of a tumble of rocks. He waited tensely. No sound reached him, except the impatient pawing of his horse.

Tommy hung his hat on his gun barrel and eased it above the rocks. Nothing happened. Dropping to hands and knees, he crawled from one boulder to another, gradually working his way to higher ground. Finding a niche in a rocky ledge, he raised his head until he could see back along the gully.

No one was in sight. But it was rough country, offering a hundred hiding places. Gun in hand, he waited, but there was no movement except the lengthening of the shadows. At last, he made his way back to where he'd left Sandy, mounted and rode on.

"Somebody sure don't want us hanging around these parts, Sandy," he muttered. "I reckon that bullet was a second invitation for us to clear out. The third may have my name on it."

Then another notion struck him. Could it be that someone was afraid that he'd come back to find the man who had killed his father?

"Maybe we should have sneaked into the basin at night, Sandy," he muttered. "Hid out in the daytime and scouted around in the dark. That way, we might have learned something without being shot at and beat up."

DARKNESS had fallen by the time he reached the ranch. Coming around the horse barn, he saw two saddle ponies standing at the yard gate. Uneasiness fiddled through him.

He went around to look through a front window, but the shade had been pulled. The rumble of men's voices came to him, but the words were indistinct. After a moment's hesitation, he stepped up to the front door, flung it open, and went in. Biff Lewis and his foreman, Ed Walters, were in the front room, talking with Stella and old John Ash.

"Good news, Tommy," Stella said, smiling up at him. But she kept her eyes hidden. "Mr. Lewis is going to help us with the haying."

Lewis turned in his chair and squinted up at Tommy. His thin face was cold and hard.

"As soon as I heard Stella had decided she wouldn't sell out this fall," he said, "I figured the neighborly thing to do is to make sure she has enough winter feed to see her through till spring."

Ed Walters had shoved to his feet. A big, hard-fisted man in his late thirties, he looked at Tommy out of cold, unfriendly eyes.

"After what happened five years ago," he said, "I didn't ever expect you'd come back to this country, Dean."

Tommy grinned faintly and said nothing.

The Lazy L owner arose, looking small and scrawny beside his foreman. "Us ranchers take care of each other," Lewis said pointedly, "and don't need no farmer to help. Let's go, Ed."

The men said goodnight to Stella and John and departed.

Tommy turned toward the girl. Her face was pale. Again she refused to meet his eyes, and he wondered just what Lewis and Walters had said to her before he arrived.

Old John shifted uneasily and cleared his throat. "Tommy, folks seem to think you've come back to start trouble. They think we've already had enough trouble—with rustlers—without havin' to worry about farmers crowdin' in on us again."

"I'm just one farmer," Tommy said bitterly. "I won't be apt to do much crowding. Besides, I didn't come back to farm."

"There's more to it than John has said," Stella spoke up. "The story's out that you're the advance man for a new settlement. That you're here to take up where your father left off. That you and the others will eventually fence off the creek and the valley lands."

So, he thought, that was what Lewis and Walters had been telling her. He saw the worry and doubt in her eyes and knew that she half-believed these stories. Suddenly he wanted to tell her the real reason he had come back—to be near her if she needed his help, to repay a debt of kindness to him and his mother. He glanced at John Ash and saw the scowl on his face. The old foreman also believed Biff Lewis and Ed Walters.

"Looks like you won't need my help now," Tommy said, picking up his hat.

"No," Stella said. Her voice sounded tired and unhappy. "I suppose I should have asked my neighbors for help in the first place instead of doing like Dad always did. Fighting his battles alone. Too proud and independent to—Tommy, where are you going?"

"Away," he answered.

"Then you ain't goin' to bring a settlement to the basin." There was vast relief in old John's voice.

"Wait until morning, Tommy," Stella said.

He shook his head. "By morning, I can be out of the basin." He told them goodbye and walked out into the night.

A west wind came out of the mountains, bringing some of the chill of the snow-capped peaks and rattling the leaves on the old cottonwoods that shaded the yard. Overhead, the stars were white-hot spots in the black velvet sky. Tommy climbed into his saddle and rode to the south. The beating had taken more out of him than he had realized. He felt like a tired, old man.

Coming to Elk Creek, he followed the

winding stream until he reached the cabin site. Dismounting, he dropped wearily onto the scorched grass, built a smoke, and cupped a flame to it. He could see the water of the creek, the glitter of reflected stars.

"Reckon there's no hurry for us to leave, Sandy," he muttered. "Maybe it would be kind of interesting to see how much help Biff Lewis gives Stella."

The big roan snorted and swung his head as if he agreed whole-heartedly.

THE sun was shining brightly when Tommy awoke. His tiredness was gone. He went down to the creek, washed, and combed the tangles out of his hair. Whistling cheerfully, he saddled Sandy and headed for Fulton.

He kept to the open country, scouting the hills and valleys for any signs of danger. He saw a scattered herd of Triangle cattle. They were young and thin. Carry them over till spring, he thought, pour the feed to 'em, and you'd have something worth selling.

Shortly after noon, he reached Fulton. The day had turned hot. The streets were deserted, except for a few saddle ponies tied here and there in the scant shade. Leaving Sandy at the livery barn, he crossed to the hotel and rented a room for the night. He was in the empty dining room, finishing up a second slice of apple pie when Sheriff Lund came in.

Tommy gave the oldster a faint welcoming grin. "Sit down, Sheriff, and have something to eat," he invited.

The sheriff sat down heavily. "No thanks. Just had my dinner." His eyes were unfriendly, his mouth grim. "My deputy said he saw you ride into town. Figured you might be here."

"Sure you won't have some pie?"

Lund shook his head. "There's talk you aim to bring in a settlement. They say there're fifteen or twenty families on their way here."

"Who says?" Tommy demanded.

The sheriff shrugged. "Everybody you talk to. There's talk that the ranchers are organizin' to keep these farmers out of the basin. Now, I don't aim to have any bloodshed if I can help it. But maybe I can't help it. I figure you ought to know what's in the wind and warn your people that—"

"Stop worrying, Sheriff," Tommy cut in. "Somebody's doing a lot of lying. I came back alone. As far as I know, there are no settlers headed this way. What's more, I'm leaving. I've had enough of being beaten up and shot at."

"Shot at?"

Tommy explained briefly.

Lund slowly shook his head. "Maybe somebody mistook you for a rustler from the foothills."

"I doubt it," Tommy said. "No excuse for this bushwhacker missing me like he did. I figure he was some rancher telling me I'm not wanted here."

"How soon you leavin', Tommy?"

"In the morning. Wanted to give my horse and myself a good night's rest."

The old man shoved to his feet. "All right, Tommy, I'll take your word for it. I only hope you're tellin' the truth. And there won't be no trouble like there was five years ago."

Tightening his hat over his white hair, the lawman walked from the dining room.

A few mintues later, Tommy stepped out on the deserted street. A freighter lumbered into town, the creaking wheels lifting up the dust and spilling it into the hot, still air. Cursing his weary horses, the driver swung the wagon into an alley beside the general store. Tommy wandered on along the plank walk, studying the brands of the saddle ponies. A Box V caught his eye, and he wondered if Vail were in town.

He wandered on to the saloon and looked in through a grimy window. One man stood at the bar, drink in hand. He was the big red-head who had helped give Tommy a beating.

Building a smoke, Tommy turned back to the hotel. Just as he moved into the shade of the narrow porch, Fred Welsh stepped out of the bank. Hurrying along the street, the banker looked smaller and more dried-up than ever. He passed the hotel without a glance, stumbled over a loose board, and disappeared through the batwings of the saloon. Tommy went on up to his room, stretched across the bed, and, in spite of the heat, fell asleep. When he awoke, it was almost sundown, and the smell of food filled the air.

Tommy sat up and grinned at his reflection in a cracked mirror. Having a battered up mug don't seem to spoil my appetite, he thought.

Eating in a lonely corner of the dining room, he watched the people come and go. Two slick-haired drummers. A few cowboys and ranchers. The banker, Fred Welsh.

Finished with eating, Tommy bought a cigar and went out on the narrow porch. Wicker chairs stood on both sides of the door. He choose one with a high, solid back and sat down.

THE town had come to life in the beginning coolness of the evening. From some place nearby came the merry laughter of a young girl. Then presently a horse and rider came in from the west. Tommy sat up a little straighter. The rider was Biff Lewis. The rancher racked his horse in front of the saloon and went in.

The two drummers came out and sat down. They lighted cigars and began to talk business. One sold hardware; the other, whisky.

Half-listening to the men, Tommy saw Sheriff Lund step from his office and cross over to the post office. From there, the lawman went on to the saloon.

"Where you from?" the whisky drummer asked.

"St. Louis," the hardware salesman answered.

Fred Welsh, the banker, came out of the hotel and stood for a moment at the edge of the porch, looking up and down the noisy street. The sound of a piano began to drift up from the saloon. Welsh lifted his skinny shoulders and walked toward the music. He too went into the saloon.

"I do a good business here," the whisky drummer said.

Tommy shoved to his feet and walked over to the saloon. It was almost dark now, and the hanging oil lamps had been lighted. He pushed through the batwing and elbowed his way up to the crowded bar. Sheriff Lund, Fred Welsh, and Biff Lewis sat at a small table near the pot-bellied iron stove. Tommy saw that they were watching him narrowly.

"Beer," he ordered, dropping a dollar on the counter.

Turning slightly, he caught a glimpse of the red-headed Box V foreman, Red Anderson, but the man seemed to be paying no attention to him. He tasted the beer. It was flat and stale. He set the glass on the counter and wandered over to the table by the stove. The three men stopped talking immediately.

"Came over to say goodby," Tommy said. "As hot as it is, I've decided to do my traveling at night and hole up in the shade during the day."

"Don't blame you", Lewis said gruffly.

"Good luck, Tommy," Sheriff Lund said, but his voice wasn't convincing.

Welsh said nothing.

Tommy turned away and walked out of the saloon. When he came to the hotel, he glanced back. The red-head had stepped outside and stood in a square of lamplight. Tommy went on to the livery barn. Before going into the barn, he glanced back again. Red Anderson had disappeared. For some reason, Tommy felt a shiver of unease steal through him.

Later, he left the barn by the rear door, leading Sandy through the blackness of a cluttered alley. Coming into the side street,

he stopped and looked both ways. All was quiet.

"Let's go, boy," he said, swinging up into the saddle.

He rode to the east until the lights of Fulton were lost behind him. Then he circled to the south and west and at last came to Elk Creek. The timber stood out black against the star-filled sky. There was no moon. He rode in under the trees, leaving it to Sandy to follow the trail.

A sudden noise from behind him made him pull up short. The snap of a twig. The sound of a movement through the underbrush. Listening, he dropped his hand to his gun.

The sounds were not repeated. Finally he rode on, came to an open meadow and, lying low, rode rapidly to the timber on the far side. Here he halted and sat watching his backtrail. He could see nothing that spoke of danger.

"Maybe I got a bad case of nerves, Sandy," he said softly at last.

They passed up the old homesite, crossed the creek, and didn't stop again until they came to the south wall of the basin. Clouds had moved into the sky, blotting out stars and increasing the darkness. But Tommy knew this country too well to be worried by darkness. He found the trail that angled up the great wall and turned Sandy into it. An hour later, they had reached the summit. Here, he dismounted and eased over to the edge of the cliff. A thousand feet below lay the floor of the basin. It was from this point that old Pat Patterson had fallen to his death.

A man could be brought up here, Tommy thought grimly, and pushed off the trail.

CHAPTER THREE

Sixgun Showdown!

MILES away, a light twinkled faintly through the darkness. That would be coming from the Triangle ranch house, he decided. And while he watched it, the light went out. Then almost directly below him there came a quick burst of flame. A few moments later, the muffled sound of the shot reached him. After that, the night was again as silent as death itself.

Tommy had no way knowing how long he stood there before he heard the horses climbing the trail. Groping for Sandy's reins, he swung into the saddle and cut back through the pines that crowned the bluff. Coming into a brushy depression, he dismounted and tied the roan.

"Easy does it, boy," he whispered. "I'll sneak back and see what I can see."

He saw two riders emerge from the trail. But they were nothing more than black blurs against the black sky. Crouching beside a boulder, he watched the riders, one large, the other small. He heard the slap of a booted rifle against a man's leg, the sound of the horses' shod hoofs on the loose stones, and nothing more. Soon they passed from his line of vision and were lost in the night.

Biff Lewis was a small man, Tommy remembered. His foreman, Ed Walters was a big man. But Marty Vail was also big. And so was Red Anderson.

Puzzled, Tommy eased back to the wall's edge and again looked out over the basin. Below, all was quiet, except for the mournful howl of a distant coyote. Not a single speck of light broke the blackness of the night. At last, he gave up and returned to where he'd left Sandy. Mounting, he rode on through the timber until he came to what was left of a hunter's cabin.

When Tommy Dean had been a boy, he had come here many times, sometimes alone, sometimes with the other boys who had lived along the creek. The roof of the cabin was gone, but the stone walls still stood, offering a shelter of sorts and a place to hide a camp fire from the wind and from curious eyes. This, he had decided, would be his headquarters until he was ready to leave the basin country. Using his saddle

for a pillow, he stretched out near one of the stone walls.

He thought of Stella Patterson and of her doubts and suspicions. His dream seemed more impossible than ever.

Again he puzzled about the gunshot and the two riders. He thought of the fear that his appearance in the basin country had stirred up. He wondered who had started the story that he was bringing settlers to the valley lands.

"That newspaper clipping," he muttered, "sure brought me slap-dab into the middle of something."

At last, shortly before dawn, he slept.

He awoke with the strange notion that someone had just spoken his name. A streak of sunlight through an opening in the stone wall told him that it was well past mid-morning. He rolled over, sat up, and found himself staring into the muzzle of a sixgun.

For a dazed moment, he saw nothing but the gun. Then he saw the man who held it. Sheriff Lou Lund. His deputy, Joe Foote, stood a little to one side. He too held a gun in his fist. Suddenly Tommy was wide awake, a tingle of fear fiddling along his spine.

"On your feet, Tommy!" Lund said in a hard voice.

Tommy stumbled to his feet. His gun was gone. Joe Foote had it tucked under his belt.

"After you shot Biff Lewis last night, you should've kept ridin', instead of takin' time out to sleep," the sheriff said.

"After I shot Biff Lewis!" Tommy gasped.

"Actin' surprised won't fool nobody," Lund laughed a short, unfunny laugh. Lewis, he said, had left Fulton about midnight. When he had failed to reach home by sun-up, Ed Walters and some of the Lazy-L boys had started to search for him. They had found him. Dead. Shot through the back, sprawled near the foot of the basin wall.

"You might as well know that Red Anderson tailed you out of town last night," Lund went on. "Followed you till you crossed the creek. Then he cut back toward the Box V. This mornin', when he heard about Lewis, he headed to town to tell us he'd seen you ridin' this way. We met him and came straight here to look for you."

"That doesn't mean I killed Lewis," Tommy said angrily.

"It all adds up," Lund said flatly. "You didn't leave the basin like you said you was goin' to. You knew Lewis was in town last night. He had just cut you out of a winter job on the Triangle.

"You don't think I'd kill a man because of that, do you?" Tommy said.

"There's something more. Maybe you figured he was the man who killed your father."

"What makes you say that?" Tommy asked sharply.

"Vail told me about how him and Lewis ran across you that first day you rode into the basin. He said the way you kept looking at Lewis made him wonder if you didn't have some idea like that in mind. He said he warned Lewis to watch out for you, but Lewis just laughed at him."

Listening, Tommy could only stare at the two lawmen. They believed Vail's story. And so would a jury made up of basin ranchers.

IT ALL began to add up now. Marty Vail was the man who wanted him out of the way. Why, Tommy didn't know for sure. And he would never find out if he let the lawmen take him back to Fulton.

He took off his hat and ran his fingers through his sunfaded brown hair. "All right," he said. "I'll go with you."

Grinning faintly, Joe Foote holstered his gun and dug a pair of handcuffs from a pocket. Tommy stepped toward the deputy, his hands outstretched, his hat still clutched in his fingers.

"Here you are, Joe," he said quietly.

Suddenly, he straightened and flung his hat in the sheriff's face. In the same motion, he caught Foote by his extended arms and swung him in a half-circle. The deputy fell against Lund. The old man stumbled back, tripped, and sat down heavily.

Foote made the mistake of taking out time to go for his holstered gun. Tommy swung at the man's exposed chin. The blow landed. Foote went sprawling over the sheriff's legs, rolled and came up hard against the wall. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and passed out.

Tommy snatched his gun from the deputy's belt and leveled it.

"Sorry, Sheriff," he said, "but if I'd let you throw me in jail, I'd never have a chance to prove I didn't kill Biff Lewis. This way, maybe I've got a chance."

"You're a damned fool!" the sheriff blazed.

Tommy didn't argue about it. He bound the two men with their own lariats and left them inside the stone house. He untied their horses and sent them running through the timber. He went back into the cabin for his saddle.

"I reckon you'll be found before you starve to death," he told the sheriff.

He saddled Sandy and rode toward the trail that led down the face of the wall into the basin. He wasn't quite sure of his next move. Vail seemed to be the man he wanted, but he wasn't sure where he could find him. Or what he would do after he got hold of him.

"We'll just have to wait and see which way he jumps when he sees I'm not stuck away in jail," he told Sandy.

He came out of the timber, and the basin lay below him, mile after mile of rolling grasslands, with Elk Creek a winding ribbon of trees and lush bottom meadows. Heading down the switchback trail, he saw the riders come around a sharp turn. Two men. A small man and a big man. Startled, Tommy pulled up short.

A booted rifle dangled from the big man's saddle and swung against his leg. And seeing the gun, Tommy Dean remembered the sound of a gun boot slapping against a man's leg in the blackness of the night. Suddenly the pieces of the puzzle began to fit.

The men had seen him. The big man was tugging at the booted rifle. Tommy turned and rode back into the shelter of the trees.

Riding straight for the stone house, Tommy left a trail a blind man could follow. He hit the ground, running, and flung himself through the empty doorway. There wasn't much time for what he had to do. He began to talk.

They didn't believe him. He untied the sheriff first. All the time, he talked, telling the old man what he knew and what he guessed.

"You're crazy!" Lund said. "So crazy you might be right!"

Tommy released Joe Foote. After that, he stepped out into the sunshine and put his broad pack against the corner of the stone doorway. He could hear the riders crashing along the trail he'd left.

A cold dampness broke out on his forehead. He was scared, and he knew it. Maybe what he had in mind would work. Maybe it wouldn't. Maybe the riders would shoot him on sight. But he had a hunch they wouldn't. It wouldn't look right if the man who was supposed to have murdered Biff Lewis was found murdered himself. It would look much better if he were to have an accident. Like tumbling from a high trail the way old Pat Patterson had tumbled to his death.

But he didn't have long for thinking. Before he'd had time to build and light a smoke, the two riders came crashing into the clearing. Seeing him, they pulled up and leveled their guns. The big man was Marty Vail. The small one wasn't Biff Lewis, for Biff was dead. He was Fred Welsh, the banker. Lifting his empty hands, Tommy waited.

The two men slid to the ground and eased forward.

"You wasn't hard to catch up with," Vail said thinly.

Tommy shrugged. "My horse is done up. Anyway, I figured it was time for us to get together."

They eyed him narrowly.

"What do you mean?" Welsh asked.

"I figure I can make a deal with you two."

"Keep talkin'!" Marty Vail gritted.

"I've been adding up the score, and it comes out like this. A crooked banker and a hoggish rancher team up to make some big profits in a hurry. The banker knows which ranchers are hard pressed for money. Like old Pat Patterson was. So he tells the rancher, and the rancher does some rustling, putting the squeeze on old Pat. Of course, he spreads his rustling around some, even to include his own ranch. But Pat is the one it really hurts. And since the Triangle has the best water and grass in the basin—"

"You're a fool, Dean!" Vail exploded. "You can't prove—"

"Let him go on," Welsh cut in harshly.

"But old Pat catches on to your scheme some way and has to be put out of the way. So you see to it that he falls over a cliff."

THIS was a shot in the dark, but it hit target. Tommy could tell that by the sudden glint in the men's eyes.

"So," he went on, "the banker talks the girl into selling out to pay her debts. It would be interesting to know how many of those debts are real and how many are faked. Anyway, the girl decides to hang on a little longer. And one of her neighbors offers to help her through the winter.

"This doesn't set well with you two. You want all that winter feed off the Triangle. So you see to it that this kindhearted rancher is put out of the way and that I get the blame for it. Also, you likely figure you can get hold of the Lazy L for a song and sing it yourself. Now, maybe you see why I figure I can make a deal with you two."

Vail thumbed back the hammer on his gun.

"Too bad you couldn't take a hint and clear out after I sent a couple bullets your way," he said.

"How much will you two pay me to keep my mouth shut?" Tommy asked cooly.

(Continued on page 113)

THE DEVIL'S DRAW

By Gordon D. Shirreffs

The man he trailed lay sprawled in the road, clawing the loose earth, and Jeff Bellew knew at last the fate that awaited him—and all men who dared hunt the killer who waited in Dragoon Pass!

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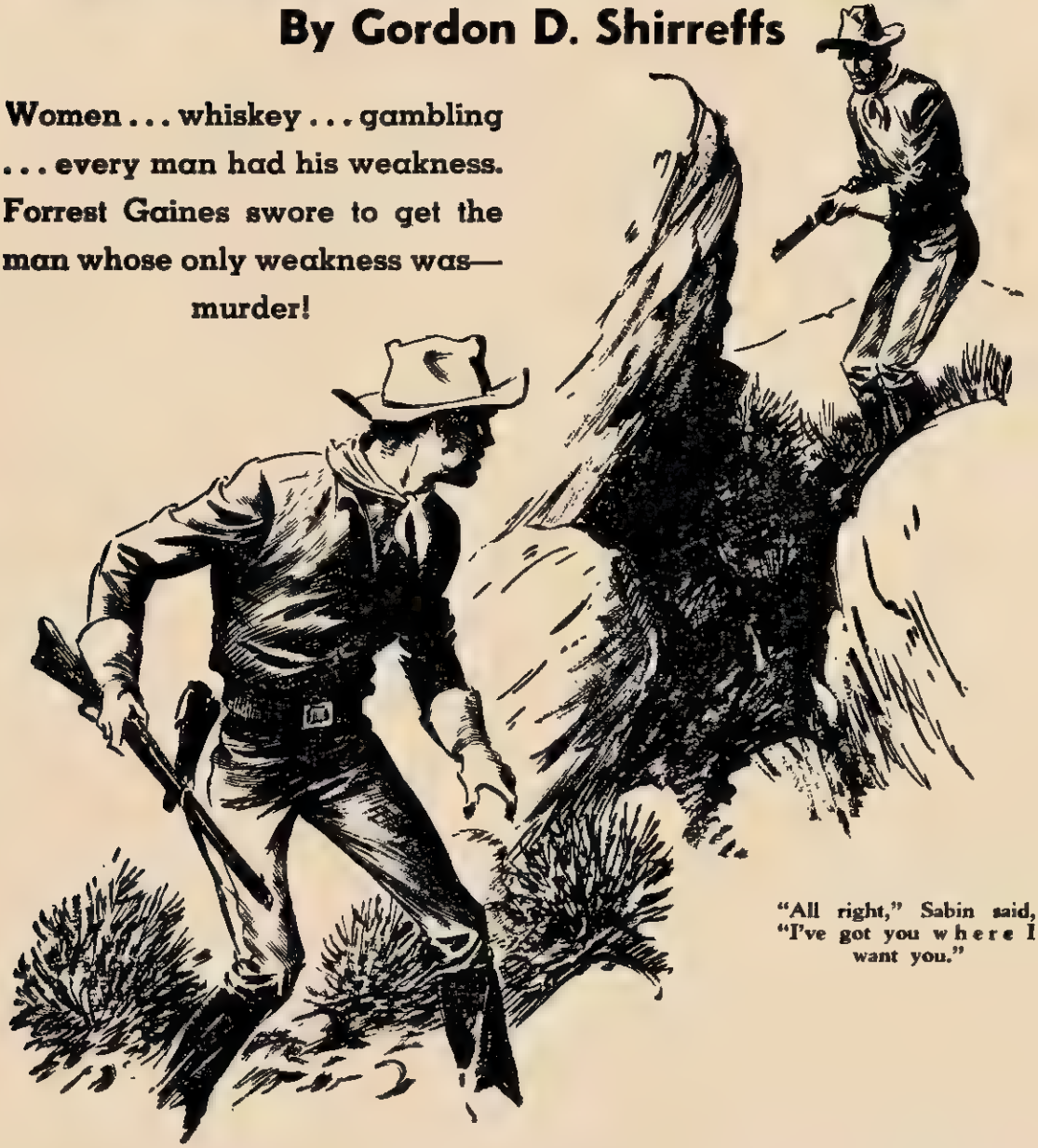
By Gordon D. Shirreffs

Women . . . whiskey . . . gambling . . . every man had his weakness. Forrest Gaines swore to get the man whose only weakness was—murder!



"All right," Sabin said, "I've got you where I want you."

THE escort-wagon wheels grated across the pebbled bed of the dry wash. Trooper Jason Hatch shivered in the cold evening wind that swept down the canyon. He jerked a thumb toward the mesa that rose steeply to the north. "There it is, Gaines," he said sourly. "Fort Shattuck. A *fort* they call it. More like an insane asylum." Hatch shook his head. "I figured when that Pinaleno buck shot an arrow clean through my gut that I'd never have to come back to this hellhole. I almost hoped I'd die. You will too after a time, Gaines."

Trooper Forrest Gaines grinned at the melancholy face across from him and then leaned his head far to one side to look past the escort-wagon driver. Perched high on

the mesa. mellowed by the last rays of the sun, were the adobes and fieldstone buildings of Fort Shattuck, looking like a handful of children's blocks from the canyon view. There was no more lonely or exposed post in the Department of Arizona. The mere threat to transfer a troop to Shattuck even from such hellholes as Fort Whalen or Fort Tatum, usually had remarkable results in the trooper's discipline and conduct.

Hatch pulled his blanket up about his shoulders. "What'd *you* do to get sent to Shattuck, Gaines?"

Gaines turned. "Nothing that I know of. I enlisted at Jefferson Barracks and was sent out west. Served temporarily at Santa Fe and then was sent down here."

"Santa Fe! You're going to miss that place, trooper."

Gaines nodded. It was as good a story as any. Colonel Armbruster had coached Gaines on his story. "You've been sent to me recommended as a man who knows undercover work, Lieutenant Leaton," he had said, "I understand that you spent most of the war working behind the rebel lines as an agent. You'll need all your experience and skill to handle the assignment I have for you at Fort Shattuck. Lieutenant Burris was murdered down there a month ago and the murderer was never apprehended. Burris was the QM at the post. We have reason to believe he was murdered because he knew too much about something that was going on at the fort. You will be assigned to Fort Shattuck as Trooper Forrest Gaines. You will have authority to arrest the killer *if* you find him. Be careful. Fort Shattuck is no plush post, Mister Leaton. You won't find tougher troopers in the whole Department than those at Shattuck."

The escort wagon began the long switchback climb up from the canyon, winding through scrub oaks and junipers. At times the outer wheels were inches from a hundred foot drop. The driver methodically chewed his tobacco and just as methodically spat at rocks with fine accuracy. He spoke over his shoulder. "One time Gus Danker was bringing up a wagon load of 'Paches along here," he said, "Damned wagon went over but Gus jumped clear. Ten 'Paches was smashed to jelly down there on them sharp rocks." The driver spat out into the void. "Gus swore up and down them wagon wheels broke through a soft spot."

"What *did* happen?" asked Gaines.

The driver grinned. "Gus' bunkie, Sam Ganoe, had been caught by them 'Paches the week before. You wouldn't have known Sam when we buried him. The sawbones said he must have been alive through most of the torturing. Gus volunteered to drive the wagon. For a time it looked as though Gus would have to pay for the wagon and the mules but he got away with it." The driver laughed. The echo slammed back and forth between the canyon walls. "Gus fooled 'em. He went nuts after a while. Shattuck was too damned hard on him. He got to where he could see them 'Paches falling down to the rocks in his sleep and he'd wake up the whole damned barracks with his screaming and laughing. Finally old Gus jumped over too."

Hatch shivered a little. "Nice place, Gaines. You'll love it."

GAINES stood up in the wagon and looked ahead as the mules turned onto the mesa road. The fort did have a magnificent view of the jumbled mountains and tortuous canyons but there seemed to be a brooding loneliness about it. Gaines sat down. "Lonely damned spot," he said.

Hatch grunted. "Wait 'til you been here a month or two. Every week there are desertions, bloody fights, men going off their nut. Even had an officer murdered here last month."

"What was the story on that?" asked Forrest.

Hatch shrugged. "I wasn't here then."

The driver turned a little and eyed Gaines. "You look like a nice fella, Gaines. Educated, I'd say. Just remember this: no one knows who killed Mister Burris. It could have been *any* one of the men on that post. Don't talk about it and don't ask no questions about the killing. This garrison is touchy, soldier. Wouldn't take much to set the whole place a-roaring. Keep your mouth shut about Burris."

"Thanks for the advice, Kremp," said Forrest.

"It's all right. Just you remember it."

The wagon rattled between the two fieldstone buildings that formed the entrance. All the buildings were loopholed. The hard eyes of the sentry held Forrest's. "Who's the rook, Hatch?" he asked as he jerked a thumb to pass Kremp through.

"Forrest Gaines. From Fort Marcy at Santa Fe."

The sentry grinned. "He'll be sorry!" he said.

It wasn't until after evening mess that Forrest got to see and experience the morale of the men at Shattuck. He was stripped to the waist, shaving, in the wash house behind D Troop's barracks. Four other men were in the washhouse. A lean trooper came in and eyed Forrest surreptitiously. As he passed Forrest he stepped hard on the back of Forrest's left heel. Forrest winced a little with the pain and turned his head. "Sorry," the trooper said with a grin. Forrest nodded and turned back to his shaving. He was bumped slightly by an elbow and cut his jaw. The other men were slyly watching Forrest get worked over by the lean trooper. The trooper dropped his wet soap on Forrest's polished boot, bent to pick it up and rammed his head up under Forrest's arm. Forrest jerked his razor away from his face in time to save himself a bad cut. "Sorry," the trooper said, grinning. He bent over his washbowl. Forrest put down his razor, suddenly gripped the hazer by the back of his neck and pushed his face down into the soapy water. The man spluttered. Forrest let him up, went under a looping right hand swing and brought in a satisfying left to the gut, and followed through with a right jab that sent the hazer crashing back against a row of racked wash basins. He jumped to his feet and ran toward Forrest, mouthing curses. A thick-bodied sergeant came in from the back door of the washhouse and stepped in between Forrest and the raging trooper. "Quiet down, Sabin," he said, easily shoving the lean trooper back. The non-com eyed Forrest. "So ye've made a start already, Gaines."

Forrest eyed the tough Irish three-striper. He had heard of Sergeant Delehan, who had fought against at least half of the hostile tribes of the west. Hard green eyes held Forrest's. "Hereafter ye do ye're fighting out behind the stables, Gaines."

"I'll kill him," said Sabin.

Delehan gripped Sabin by the arm with one huge hand. He shook him easily as he talked. "Ye were probably hazing the man," he said. "Ye learned a lesson. I hope it sinks through ye're thick skull." He shoved the trooper back and turned toward Gaines. "Get on with yere shaving." He sat down on a box and filled his pipe. "How long have ye been in?" he asked.

"Three months."

"Ye were a soldier afore that though, me boy."

Gaines nodded.

"In the war perhaps?"

"Yes. How did you know, Sergeant Delehan?"

Delehan lit his pipe. "There is a bullet scar on yere back, Gaines, and a long scar across yere right ribs that could have been made by a bayonet slash."

Forrest studied the non-com in his mirror. The Irishman was leading up to something.

Delehan waited, puffing at his pipe until Forrest was the only other man in the

washhouse. "The war has been over seven years," he said quietly, "Where have ye been since then?"

Forrest shrugged into his shirt and gathered his toilet articles together. He eyed the Irishman. "You can learn all of that from my record file, Sergeant Delehan."

Delehan watched the tobacco smoke lift and waver and then drift out of a window. "So, *that's* the way it is?"

"Yes."

Delehan stood up. "I try to keep tabs on all me men. Each of ye has a weakness, Gaines. Wimmen, likker, cards and other things. Ye come in here with polished speech and no marks of heavy drinking on yer face. If ye were a southerner I'd say ye were once a ribil officer, but I do not think so."

Forrest smiled. "What is it then, Sergeant Delehan? Wimmen or cards?"

Thin lines formed at the corners of the non-com's mouth. He crossed the room and stood close beside Forrest. "I do not know, me bucko. But I'll find out. Ye licked Sabin easily enough."

"By surprise. He didn't expect it."

"Perhaps. But there are others who will try ye. Better men than Sabin."

"You?"

Delehan grinned. "Not unless ye make me do it. Now listen: I like a man who *has* weaknesses, for then I know how to handle him. I do not know yeres, but there is a chip on yere shoulder. Take it off yereself or have it knocked off by one of the boys. It does not matter. But do not give *me* trouble." Delehan turned on a heel and left the washhouse. Forrest shrugged. He might have known someone would be suspicious of him. Maybe Delhan had been *waiting* for someone like him to come to Fort Shattuck.

THE next morning Forrest was notified by the topkick that he was to work in the QM warehouse as clerk under Sergeant Delehan who had taken over the detail after the death of Lieutenant Burris. Forrest reported for duty. A tall officer was standing looking out of a loophole toward the distant mountains. He turned as Forrest reported. Second Lieutenant George Stanley was a man the suns of the Southwest would never tan. His hair was ashy blonde and his fair skin was reddened by the sun. There were dark circles under his blue eyes. The startling thought came to Forrest that George Stanley would have made a beautiful woman. "Gaines?" said Stanley quietly, "What do you know of paperwork?"

"I have done clerical work, sir."

"Good! Delehan does his best but he is a line soldier. I can't seem to get quartermaster work through my head."

Forrest smiled. "It is rather a dull detail, sir."

Stanley nodded. "You speak like an educated man, Gaines. Usually any army clerk *is* educated; but a drunkard. The two seemed to be always coupled together."

"It has been said that if it weren't for whiskey there wouldn't be any clerks in the army, Mister Stanley."

George Stanley laughed bitterly. "I'm afraid the post commander, Captain Crocker, can outdrink any three enlisted men at Fort Shattuck."

Gaines did not answer. Stanley waved a hand. "Take it easy until Delehan gets here. I'll be in the back." He walked slowly past the tiers of supplies and vanished at the rear of the long stone building. Forrest shrugged, and sat down at one of the battered desks. Burris had been found stabbed to death in the very building in which Forrest now sat. The murder weapon had never been found. Forrest began to work throughout the front of the room. He had no illusions about finding any clues. Whoever had done the crime had had plenty of time to cover up his tracks. Forrest looked back past the tiers of crates and boxes; bags and bales. Dust motes

danced in the streamers of sunlight that lanced through the narrow windows and loopholes. The door banged open behind him. He turned. An officer stood there, a captain. It was the post commander, Captain Lane Crocker. His face was flushed. "Who are you?" he asked Forrest.

"Private Forrest Gaines, sir."

"What are you doing in here?"

"I've been assigned to clerk for Sergeant Delehan, Captain Crocker."

"Where is Mister Stanley?"

Forrest hesitated. There was no doubt in his mind that the shavetail was asleep in the back of the warehouse.

"Sleeping, I'll warrant." Crocker pushed past Forrest and strode between the tiers. The odor of whiskey swept past Forrest. In a moment he heard Crocker cursing. "Damn it, George!" he said, "You're making too good a thing out of this."

"You want that trooper to hear?" asked Stanley.

"Come over to my office as soon as Delehan gets here." Crocker strode past Forrest and slammed the door behind him. Delehan rubbed his jaw and looked out through the front window, watching Crocker striding toward post headquarters. He turned as Stanley came up the aisle between the supplies, brushing his uniform. He yawned. "I'll be at headquarters, Delehan."

Forrest leaned back against a pile of bags and eyed Delehan. "The shavetail was sleeping again?" asked Delehan.

Forrest nodded. "The captain seemed damned hot about it," he said.

Delehan sucked at a tooth. "Aye. But nothing will come of it. Mister Stanley will be back for his afternoon nap and either Mister Gladstone or Mister Dwyre will lead today's patrol as usual." He shook his head. "They do not like the idea of Mister Stanley getting the plush jobs on the post. There will be more trouble on Officer's Row, me boy."

Forrest waited. The Irishman was in a talkative mood. Delehan sat down at his desk and leaned back, filling his pipe. "Yon shavetail knows nothing of supply," he said quietly, "Nor does he want to learn. The whole post knows it is Tim Delehan who is the QM here."

Forrest sat down. "Seems to me Captain Crocker hasn't done much with Mister Stanley," he said.

"Ye've a sharp eye. Shavetails have a time of it on any new post. Yon Stanley has been out of West Point but six months. He got here two months ago. For a time he was given the usual shavetail details. He went on patrol three times with me. I did not like it."

"Why?"

Delehan puffed at his pipe. "The man is deathly afraid of Apaches."

Forrest grinned. "Who isn't?"

Delehan studied Forrest. "Aye. We *all* are. One way or another. But we go *on*, me boy."

"Meaning?"

"Get to work! File those duplicate requisitions. I've talked too much already."

IN THE days that followed Forrest kept busy in the warehouse under the hard hand of Delehan. Patrols came and went, led always by Mister Dwyre, an officer who had come up from the ranks, or Mister Gladstone, a man with the true professional mark about him. George Stanley dawdled in the QM warehouse or napped in his quarters. There was an undercurrent of fear and hatred on the sunbeaten post. Forrest had no chance to probe about until Delehan was sent to Fort Ash with four wagons to draw supplies. Mister Stanley kept to his quarters one windy day. Forrest had asked for the still convalescing Jason Hatch to give him a hand and the lean trooper was grateful. Forrest sent him to take inventory of the farrier's supplies and then began his systematic search of the warehouse. In an hour he had learned nothing. At the back of the warehouse

were piles of gun crates. He studied them. Thirty Sharps singleshot breechloaders, caliber fifty and twenty Spencer repeaters, caliber fifty. The troops at the post were armed with the 45/70 issue singleshot Springfield. Forrest went to the files and checked on the fifty stored carbines. They had been issued in 1865, seven years before, to the company of California volunteers who had built and garrisoned Fort Shattuck during the Apache troubles in the Civil War. Forrest scratched his jaw. There was no reason for those carbines to be stored at Shattuck. They should have been turned into ordnance for sale or reissue.

Hatch came in as Forrest replaced the file on the carbines. He handed Forrest his inventory. "Corporal-Farrier Danneker gave me hell, Forrest," he said with a grin, "The Dutchman don't like anyone poking in his damned gear."

"Too damned bad." Forrest handed Hatch a cigar. "What kind of a man was Mister Burris, Hatch?"

Hatch lit his cigar. "Knew his business. A far better man than most officers."

"How he'd get along with the other officers?"

Hatch puffed at his cigar. "Why?"

"Just curious. None of them here now seem to get along very well."

Hatch shook his head. "It's that damned Mister Stanley. Dwyre and Gladstone have their butts worn thin handling the patrols and the drilling. That shavetail is practically on leave here."

"Why doesn't Crocker straighten him out?"

Hatch shrugged. "He can play poker like a Mississippi River gambler. He's into Crocker for plenty."

"I see."

Hatch went to the window. "Crocker has been shaky for a long time, Forrest. Drinking, gambling and trying to get a transfer out of here."

"What about Burris?"

"Oh, yeh! I was on guard one night, near headquarters. Burris came in while Crocker and Stanley were in there. Stanley wanted Burris' job. Burris didn't seem to care, but he wanted Crocker to do something before he turned over the detail to Stanley."

"What was that?"

"Turn in some carbines that had been left here since the war."

"So?"

"Crocker got riled. Told Burris to mind his damned business. Burris refused to give up the detail unless the guns were returned to ordnance. Crocker told him to keep his damned detail."

"I wonder why?"

"Who knows? Burris was strict, Forrest. Wouldn't let anyone monkey with the QM detail over his head."

"Crocker, as post commander, could still order him to forget about the carbines."

"Yeh, but he didn't."

Forrest puffed at his cigar. The carbines intrigued him. He had a picture of Burris now, as an efficient officer, who wouldn't allow any slipshod business about his detail. Forrest would follow that line. It was the only lead he had found so far.

FORREST lay in his bunk that night until the barracks was still, the only sound the heavy breathing of the other troopers. He got up and padded out of the barracks, carrying his boots. He had thrust his issue Colt into his waistband and buttoned his shell jacket over it. The moon was up, but dimmed by heavy clouds. He circled about between the outbuildings, avoiding the sentries. He opened the QM warehouse and went in, locking the door behind him. He padded back through the darkness until he found the gun cases. He took one down. It was heavy. He worked at the thumbscrews and opened one. It was marked as containing four Spencers. He lifted the lid and felt in the

heavy box. His hand met bags, seemingly filled with sand. The guns were gone. He worked swiftly, the sweat soaking through his shirt and jacket, until he had checked all the boxes. They were all filled with bags of sand. Fifty fine weapons were missing. He replaced the last box and went to the front of the warehouse. Things were beginning to fit into place. He opened the door quietly and stepped out. As he reached to lock the door something grated behind him. Something hard slammed alongside his head. He reeled into the dark warehouse. A fist caught him on the mouth, cracking a tooth and he crashed back against the wall. He covered up as his opponent closed in, battering at him with his fists. Forrest wrestled his man about and brought a knee up into his groin. The man grunted and Forrest threw him back, lashing out at the dim face before him. They closed again and fingers dug into Forrest's throat. He drove home two vicious punches. The man went back and hit the wall, overturning a file cabinet. Forrest staggered back as boots slammed on the hard earth. "Corporal of the Guard! Post number Five!" a man yelled.

Forrest looked up as a man came into the office holding a candle lantern high. The shadows danced. It was Trooper Orris Bentick from Forrest's platoon. "What the hell is this, Gaines?" asked the sentry.

Forrest looked down at the man he had knocked out. It was Trooper Sabin. Corporal Kelly and Lieutenant Dwyre came into the warehouse. Dwyre looked down at Sabin. "What happened, Gaines," he asked.

"Sabin jumped me."

"Here?"

"Yes, sir."

"What were you doing in here?" asked Dwyre suspiciously. His hard gray eyes studied Forrest.

"I had forgotten whether or not I locked the door," lied Forrest, "As I checked it Sabin hit me from behind, Mister Dwyre."

"Sabin was on guard near here," said Bentick.

Dwyre turned toward Forrest. He jerked the Colt from Forrest's waistband. ,What were you doing with this?"

"I've heard the Pinalenos sometimes lurk about the post at night, sir."

Dwyre grunted. A tall man came in. It was Lieutenant Stanley. He looked quickly at Forrest. "What is this, Jim?" he asked of Dwyre.

Dwyre shrugged. "Gaines claimed he came here to see if the door was locked. Sabin was on guard and jumped him." He spat. "So Gaines says."

Stanley looked quickly at the back of the warehouse. "What are you going to do with him?"

"Put him in the guardhouse until we get at the bottom of this."

As Gaines was marched from the warehouse he saw Stanley walk quickly to the back of the warehouse near where the gun-cases were stored.

FORREST awoke from sleep as hooves grated on the hard *caliche* of the parade ground. He shivered in the dawn wind as he got up and went to the barred window. Sergeant Nesbit swung down from his horse. Eight other men dismounted. It was Mister Gladstone's patrol. Forrest gripped the bars. Gladstone had taken sixteen men out. He looked at the back of the patrol. Eight men were lashed across their saddles. Dead. Four of the other men were bandaged. Captain Crocker came out of his quarters, hastily buttoning his shell jacket. Nesbit saluted. "Bad news, sir," he said quietly, "The Pinalenos hit us at Sand Flats. Hid in holes with sand-covered blankets over them. Opened fire and cut us to pieces. Mister Gladstone fell at the first fire."

"For the love of God! How did it happen?"

"We might have had a chance, Captain Crocker, but they had repeaters. Spen-

cers. They cut us to ribbons. Some of them had Sharps and killed three more men before we got under cover. I never saw the Pinalenos with guns like that before."

Forrest glanced at the warehouse. *Sharps and Spencers.* The tie-in was obvious. Forrest cursed to himself as he looked at the still forms on the horses. Lieutenant Stanley crossed the paradeground with quick steps. He paled as he saw the dead men. Segeant Nesbit turned toward the captain. "The Pinalenos are not more than ten miles from here, sir. I've never seen them so bold. I'd like to go back and get at them, sir. Will you send out the troop, sir?"

Crocker slowly rubbed his jaw. "Part of it. You'll have to take them, Mister Stanley."

George Stanley looked quickly at Captain Crocker. "I've a lot of work to do, Captain Crocker."

Nesbit turned away and spat. Crocker flushed. "Dwyre is on guard. I can't go myself. You'll have to take the command, George."

Stanley walked toward the guardhouse. "I want to talk to you, sir."

Crocker followed the shavetail into the guardhouse. Forrest crossed to the door and placed his ear against it. "I'm not going, Lane," said Stanley.

"You'll have to!"

"I won't go. I'll take over the guard. Send Dwyre."

"I can't go on like this, George. It's getting too obvious."

"You know what I can do if you don't send Dwyre."

"Damn you! You've had your way long enough."

There was a silence. Forrest peered through a crack in the door. Stanley was staring at the door. "Let's get out of here. There's a prisoner in here."

"Who?"

"Trooper Gaines. He was in the warehouse last night. He fought and beat Trooper Sabin."

Crocker flushed. He gripped Stanley by the arm and hustled him out the door. "You damned fool! What if he heard us?" he asked.

Forrest went to the window and watched the two officers hurry toward headquarters. Obviously George Stanley had something on Captain Crocker. Forrest cursed himself for being so careless the night before. He could do nothing while he was in the guardhouse.

SERGEANT DELEHAN was hours overdue at noon but the punitive patrol had not yet left Fort Shattuck. By this time the Pinalenos could have been miles away. Corporal Kelly came in shortly after noon and released Forrest. "Yere to go with the patrol," he said.

Forrest shrugged. "Who's leading it?"

"Captain Crocker."

"What about Mister Stanley?"

Kelly grinned. "The shavetail is to go too. Mister Dwyre will take command here."

Gaines glanced quickly at Kelly. "Any news of Delehan?"

"The mail carrier claims he heard shooting in Peligroso Canyon."

"Delehan?"

Kelly shrugged. "He had to come that way with his wagons. The Pinalenos are raising hell, Gaines." He eyed Forrest. "What's the truth about last night?"

"You heard the story."

Kelly nodded. "Stick with it then. It's none of me business. But a word, trooper: watch your back when Sabin is around. For he is to go on the patrol too."

Five miles had dropped behind the patrol and the sun beat down in fury. Forrest eyed the two officers. Stanley was jittery. Time and again he placed a hand on the cantle of his saddle and looked back at Forrest. Trooper Sabin rode in the next set of four from Forrest and his face was

still swollen. The words of Kelly came back to Forrest time and time again. *"Watch your back when Sabin is around."*

They heard the firing as they debouched from Little Creek Canyon into the larger Peligroso Canyon. Forrest went ahead on a scout with Kelly and two other troopers. On the floor of the canyon they saw the four supply wagons in a square. Puffs of smoke drifted from them and the echoing gun reports slammed back and forth between the canyon walls. Here and there amongst the rocks they could see the brown forms of the Apaches, pouring in a hot fire.

"Poor ould Delehan," said Kelly as he shifted his chew, "Boxed in, he is."

"There must be at least fifty of them red hellions down there," said Trooper Erskine. "And us with but thirty men."

"Would ye leave Delehan to get his way out of the soup, ye scut?" demanded Kelly.

"What's another Irishman, more or less?" grinned Erskine.

Kelly spat. "There'd be no soldiers tough enough to handle the hostiles, is all," said Kelly.

"Listen to him," jeered Erskins, "You'd think the damned Irish were the only troopers in the Department."

Kelly shook a fist at Erskine. "I'll settle this wid ye when we get back to Shattuck," he said.

"If we do, Corp. *If we do."*

Gaines kneed his horse close to the noncom. "If we spilt into two parties; one to cut through the rough land behind the Pinalenos and the other to demonstrate from this direction, we might have them," he said without thinking.

Kelly looked quickly at him. "I see no stripes or bars on ye, Gaines," he said.

"A damned strategist," said Erskine.

Forrest shrugged. "How else can it be done, Kelly?"

"Aye. I see it. We'd best get back to the C.O."

Crocker listened as Kelly told him of Forrest's thought. He eyed Forrest. "You've been a soldier before?" he asked.

"In the war, sir."

"You weren't a private then?"

"A sergeant, sir. In the volunteers."

Crocker turned to Stanley. "Take half the men. You take Kelly."

Stanley paled. "We're badly outnumbered, Captain Crocker."

Crocker grunted. "We usually are." He took out a silver flask and drank deep and then offered it to the shavetail. "Drink. You'll need it from the looks of you."

Stanley shook his head. "Let's stay together, Lane."

Forrest watched the two officers. Kelly had ridden back to get his men. "Get back to your squad, Gaines," said Crocker. As Forrest rode back he heard Crocker's words, carried on the wind. "I can't cover up *all* the time for you, George. You've *got* to take this detail."

"Damn you! You brought me out here on purpose."

Crocker replaced his flask. "Maybe. What can you do about it now? Run away?"

Kelly took his men out and led them up to Stanley. The second lieutenant was visibly shaken as he kneed his gray away from Captain Crocker. He led the way through the shintangle brush. Kelly slowed his horse and glanced at Forrest. "I do not like this, Gaines. That man is afraid."

"Aren't you?"

"Aye! But not like him. He is licked before we fire a shot."

KELLY had the men dismount and left the horses with the horseholders. Mister Stanley picked at his lower lip as Kelly took over and deployed the troopers. Sabin flipped open the breech of his carbine and loaded it. His eyes studied Forrest. The firing in the canyon had increased. Kelly looked at Mister Stanley. "Now, sir?"

Stanley sat down on a rock. "The sun

is too much for me, Kelly. Lead the men on."

Kelly spat. "Come on then," he said.

Forrest checked his carbine and pistol, glancing back at the officer. Sabin had stopped to talk with Stanley. They looked at Forrest. Sabin trotted up behind the detail. They entered a rough area, cut up by piles of rock and thick brush. Forrest dropped behind. Suddenly he was alone in the tangle. Sabin was nowhere in sight. Shots cracked out as Kelly opened the ball. Farther up the canyon Captain Crocker began his fight. Forrest glanced back toward where the officer was sitting. It wouldn't do to get himself embroiled in the fight; he had another job to do. Boots grated on rock. Forrest turned quickly. Sabin had stepped out from behind a rock shoulder. His carbine was at hip level, covering Forrest. "All right," he said thinly, "I've got you where I want you."

Forrest stopped and grounded his carbine. "What do you want, Sabin?" he asked.

"Your blood, Gaines."

"Because of a fight? I'll meet you back at Shattuck and settle it, if that's what you want."

Sabin shook his head. "I'm getting paid to get rid of you, Gaines. You've been acting too damned suspicious to suit us."

"Us?"

"Mister Stanley and me."

"I don't get it," said Forrest, stalling for time. The firing had increased.

The carbine hammer clicked back. "Stanley thinks you were sent here to check up on him and Crocker."

"So? Why?"

"They covered up pretty well. You *might* be an agent."

Slugs whined through the air. A cold feeling came over Forrest. A bullet ricochetted from a rock, showering Sabin with bits of rock. He turned. Forrest moved in, gripped the carbine barrel, pulling Sabin close and hacking in a hard right jab. Sabin cursed. He pulled back but Forrest followed through with a right to the jaw. Sabin jerked at his carbine. Forrest pushed the barrel up. The gun flatted off, Sabin jumped back, dragging at his Colt. Forrest fired his carbine. Sabin went down with a slug in his chest. He was dead. Forrest reloaded. Boots clashed behind him. George Stanley rounded a rock and looked down at Sabin.

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Forrest covered the officer with his carbine. "Talk," he said. "What do you know about Burris and the missing carbines?"

Stanley looked down at the gun. "You're mad!"

Forrest shook his head. "I'm Lieutenant Leaton, from Department Headquarters. Talk, Stanley!"

The officer paled. "I *thought* there was something suspicious about you!"

"You can talk now, Stanley. There isn't much time."

"It was Crocker, not me."

"What's your part in it?"

"I was in deep with Crocker. He owed me close to a thousand dollars. I threatened to expose him if he didn't pay off. He offered to sell the carbines to a gun runner. Burris became suspicious. He and Crocker fought and Crocker was badly beaten. We paid Sabin to get rid of Burris."

Forrest eyed the officer in disgust. "And *you* held it over Crocker's head to get out line duty."

"What would *you* have done? Don't turn me in! I'll pay you off. I've got money! For God's sake, Leaton! *Don't* turn me in. I come from a good family. I'll get a transfer out of Arizona."

Forrest shook his head. Stanley turned and ran. Forrest raced after him. Stanley rounded a high rock shoulder. Forrest closed in. Two men jumped from behind a rock ledge. *Pinalenos.* A knife slashed at Stanley. He screamed as blood poured from his gashed face. Forrest fired from the hip, spinning the warrior about. The second warrior fired. The slug whipped through the crown of Forrest's campaign hat. He swung up his carbine and sent the first warrior sprawling with a smashed skull. The second warrior sank his knife deep into Stanley and leaped up on the ledge. Forrest fired his Colt twice, spinning the buck about. He dropped atop the dead officer. Forrest wiped his face and reloaded. He ran to where the firing was heaviest. Kelly was driving the Pinalenos back into the line of Crocker's men. The Pinalenos broke and fled. Forrest raced up, firing into the brown of the Apaches. He hurlded a dead horse. Delehan looked up from beneath a wagon. "The clerk," he said with a grin, "You'll make a damned hero out of yereself yet, Gaines," Forrest bent to bandage a bullet hole in the sergeant's right shoulder. The troopers under Crocker came up, driving the Pinalenos back. Forrest turned to the captain. "Trooper Sabin is dead, sir. Lieutenant Stanley is dead too."

A look of relief crossed the officer's sweating face. Forrest walked up to him. "I'd like a moment with you, sir."

CARBINE fire still rattled in the gorge as Crocker followed Forrest, leading his gray. Forrest turned, out of earshot of the troopers. He drew his Colt. "I'm placing you under arrest, Captain Crocker."

"What for? Who are you?"

"I'm Lieutenant Leaton from Department Headquarters. You are under arrest for planning the death of Mister Burris and placing guns in the hands of the Pinalenos."

Crocker paled. He reached for his flask. "I knew I'd be found out some day."

Forrest watched the flask go up. He shook his head.

Crocker wiped his mouth. "I've got fifteen years service, Leaton," he said quietly, "Wounded three times in the war. Held a colonel's brevet for bravery at Cold Harbor. It's all gone now."

Forrest looked away. He hated the business. He had been promised a captaincy and a line command if he was successful at Fort Shattuck.

Crocker drank again. "Leaton," he said quietly, "What will they do with me?"

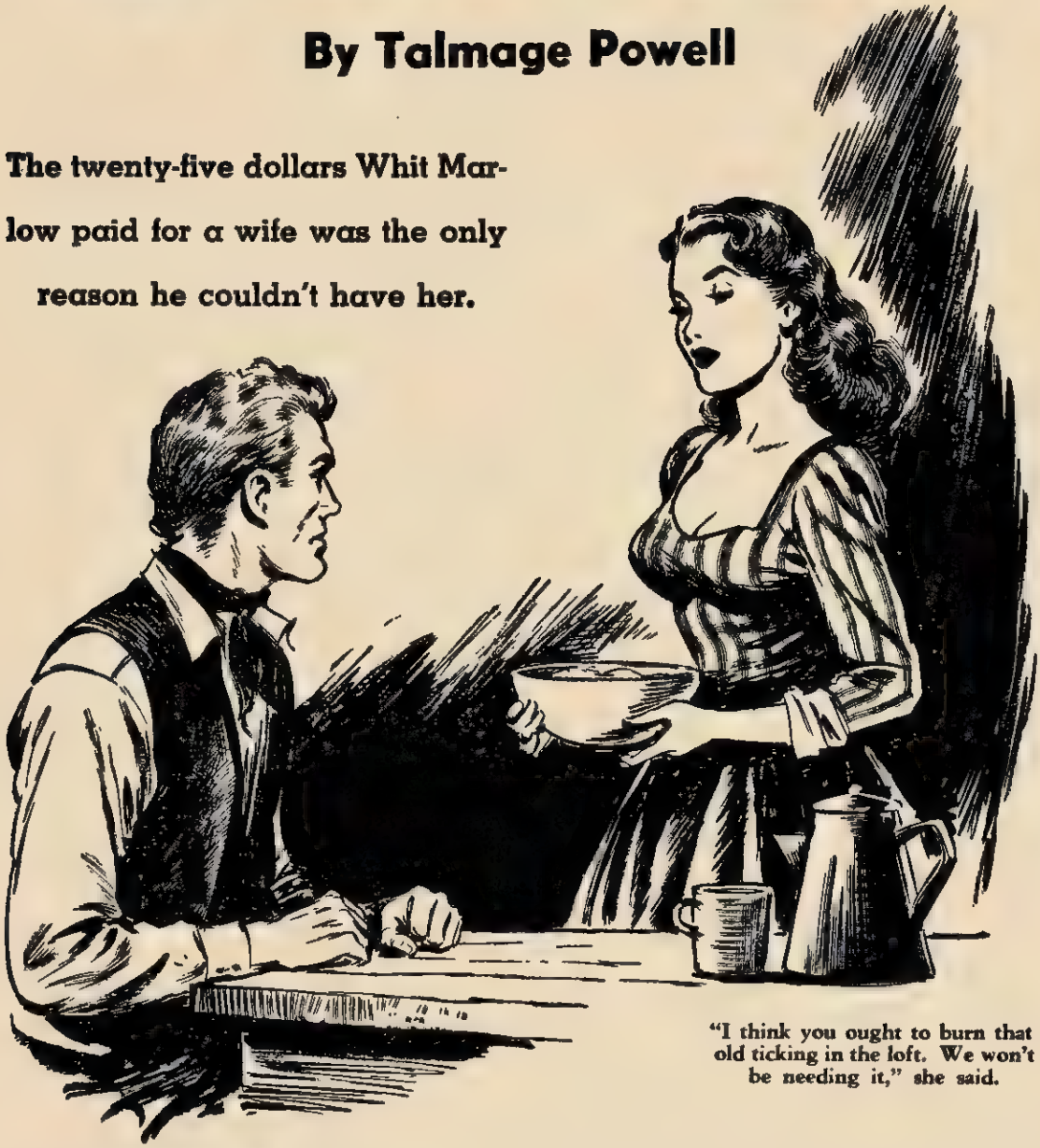
"I don't know."

(Continued on page 110)

No Man's Woman

By Talmage Powell

The twenty-five dollars Whit Marlow paid for a wife was the only reason he couldn't have her.



"I think you ought to burn that old ticking in the loft. We won't be needing it," she said.

NEW to the country as he was, Whit Marlowe had heard enough about Cash Rigsby to suspect the old man was stopping today because it was mealtime.

Cash pulled up in the yard and sat his bony horse like a hunk of dried venison for so long that Whit had to invite him in.

"Well," Cash said, jumping from his horse, "I can always spare the time to be neighborly." He led his horse toward the pole-sapling barn and Whit yelled after him where to find grain.

Whit turned back into his cabin shaking his head. Cash was reputed to be one of the richest men in the valley, the kind who loved coin for its own sake.

Cash came into the cabin as Whit was slicing sidemeat into a skillet on the sheet-iron stove. Cash was shivering a little. The day had been blustery, the coming night promised to be cold, and the stove had not had time to warm the cabin.

Cash eyed the cold fireplace in the next room, the untidiness of the unmade bed there, the dirty dishes on the table beside the stove, and into his eyes there came a calculating gleam.

Whit heated beans, made coffee, and got out cold bread, and they sat down to eat.

Cash fell to with gusto, and after he'd taken the edge from his appetite, he leaned back, borrowed makings, and rolled himself a cigarette.

"Getting on right well here, I take it," Cash said.

"Ain't starving."

"Yep, I think you got a chance making something of this place. You seem like a sensible young feller. Rode range for quite awhile to save the money to buy here, didn't you?"

"A goodly piece of time," Whit admitted. "But it was worth it. I always wanted a place of my own."

" 'Course you'll never realize the full possibilities of this place alone."

"Thanks," Whit grinned, "but I don't want a partner."

"Every man needs a certain kind of partner," Cash stated. "Look at you, dog-tired and muddy to your hips from pulling bog. And still got all your household chores to do. Feel the cold gloom of this house, like no one a-tall lived here. It ain't a home and never will be, until there's a woman in it. Think how different it could be, young feller, with a fire waiting in there and clean clothes and good hot food. Why, all you'd have to do after a hard day's work is set back before the fire, hear the woman singing softly, feel her presence, and know she is looking after your comfort. Not to mention the help she can be with the chores.

"Man alone is just half living, the way I see it," Cash said, rolling himself a second cigarette from Whit's makings. "To have the full life, you need a help-meet. You need to put down roots, see your herds expand, watch your children grow, knowing that someday they'll pick up the job you'll have to lay down. Man like that leaves his mark. Man like that is just about immortal, I say. But first off, you have to have a wife."

Whit sat quietly. Old Cash was amazing. He had plucked the ambition—or dream, if you will—right out of Whit's mind.

Whit cleared his throat. "To tell the truth, I've been thinking along those lines, but I'm a stranger here, and there are not enough womenfolk to go around as it is."

"The game," Cash said, "falls to the hunter. Now you take that youngest gal of mine, Laura her name is. . ."

Whit eased back in his chair to hide his sudden irritation. Cash's words had an air of foreboding: "You take that daughter of mine. . ." Why, the old skin-flint! Riding over this way not just for a meal, but to see if something might be done about safely terminating the expense of a daughter who couldn't be put to much profitable use on a ranch already over-staffed by strapping sons.

WHIT controlled his anger. Old Cash was about as subtle as a keg of dynamite in a hot branding fire. He described his girl in a round-about way and a right attractive picture he painted. Good horsewoman. Handy with a lariat, too. Hardly bigger than the whisper of a sweet spring breeze, and didn't eat much, though she was strong. And pretty as a peach-tree blossom.

I'll bet! Whit thought, visioning a young, lazy horse of a woman who could outeat all her brothers combined.

Cash changed the subject to the weather and winter hay, but when he was ready to

go, he said, "Thanks for the meal, Marlowe. Why don't you come over Sunday," he hesitated, unable to hide the grimace the effect of being generous cost him, "and let us return the favor? I'll have the old lady kill a chicken, by jiminy!"

"Like to, but I'm pretty tired of a Sunday. Just rest all day."

Cash's face fell. "Yeah, well if you had some help around the place you wouldn't be so tired. Come if you can. We'll be looking for you."

Whit mentioned the experience to the storekeeper in Sourroot the next day. Whit was usually pretty taciturn, but the intervening hours had shaded his desire to kick old Cash in the pants. He was able to relate the humor of Cash's call without feeling or arousing rancor.

Then in the midst of his fancied description of the horse-faced Miss Rigsby, Whit stopped speaking, seeing the strange look on the storekeeper's face.

He looked over his shoulder, following the storekeeper's gaze. A girl had quietly entered the store. Now she was standing at the end of the counter, her hand gripping its edge. Her face was white and her eyes were enormous with hurt.

In a moment of terrible silence, Whit saw that she was young, slender, and mighty easy to look at. Her small face was painted with the rouge of the great outdoors. Her hair was a dark, softly waving brown.

She turned and marched out of the store, her back stiff and straight.

Whit swallowed. "That was. . ."

The storekeeper nodded. He spat tobacco juice at the sandbox surrounding the potbellied stove. "Anything else you want?"

"If you stocked them," Whit said, "I'd take half a dozen muzzles, the tightest, strongest kind."

In a suit that still had the smell of a store on it, Whit went to church Sunday. The Rigsbys were not there, and when he mentioned Cash, he gathered that the old man considered church going too expensive. Cash had been spooked by the collection plate the first time it ever passed him.

Lester Vinoy saw Whit in the churchyard and came over to say hello. Lester was about Whit's age, but he looked older—as if responsibility had matured and hardened him. Lester lived on the next place, south of Whit. He had lost his wife a year ago and had three small children to take care of. They were nearby now, chasing each other around and under a buckboard while the middle-aged Mexican woman who kept house for Lester tried to shush them.

Lester was a pleasant, square-faced man, with a rangy, powerful body. He scratched his yellow hair and said he and Whit were going to have to do something about a shared water hole.

"Not the time or place to talk it over," Lester apologized. "But I've been wanting to get over to your place the last two weeks and just haven't had the chance. I believe we could dredge that sink, build a dam, and have a good, consistent, controlled water supply."

"Sounds like a fine idea," Whit said. "Doesn't Cash Rigsby use some water out of that sink?"

"Yes, he does."

"Maybe he'd like to help out with the job."

"Fat chance," Lester said.

"Well, I could ride by there on the way home and mention it to him," Whit decided.

"You're wasting your time," Lester said. "You just don't know old Cash. If a big dry-up or bad sickness comes, Cash is the best neighbor a man can have, if you ignore his growling like a hornet-stung maverick. But things have to get pretty grim. In any situation approaching normal, Cash will bargain the spurs right off your boots."

"It's none out of my way," Whit said

casually, "I might as well give it a try."

"Watch yourself he doesn't have us contracted to pay for the privilege of dredging that sink."

Whit had already turned away and mounted.

THIRTY minutes riding brought Whit to the Rigsby place. The house was a low, austere building of white-washed logs. Everything about the place bespoke the barren neatness that comes of much hard work and thrift carried to an extreme. There was not the usual halter where it might weather on the barren corral post; nor flop-eared dog coming to meet the approaching horseman; nor furniture of any kind on the porch. The windows were so clean they shone like jewels, but there were no curtains behind them. Whit guessed you wouldn't find even a loose piece of baling wire around this place.

Cash came out on the porch. He stepped down, grunted, "Well, I see you took the invite."

"Kind of you to ask me."

Cash nodded; then he yelled, "boys! Roll out, you good for nothing eatin' and sleepin' critters!"

The boys were three in number and each stood over six feet. Their beef dwarfed their father, but Whit guessed from their attitudes that they were accustomed to taking orders with no back talk. After all, a little stick of dynamite can move the side of a hill.

This, Cash informed Whit, was Todd and Terry, the twins, and Clete, the eldest. Clete was a big, grave, weathered man of perhaps twenty-six. The twins were freckled, blue-eyed, with faces that glowed with health.

They all shook hands with Whit. Cash said, "Clete, hobble the guest's mare down by the creek where she can graze."

Cash nudged Whit in the ribs. "Now come on and meet the one you really came to see."

She sat beside Whit in the little-used Rigsby parlor. Dinner was over. Mrs. Rigsby was in the kitchen. Cash and the boys were outside, leaving Whit and Laura alone.

Whit ventured a glance at her. She was sitting stiff and straight, her face like a carven cameo. Whit cracked his big-knuckled hands and tried to think of something to say.

He cleared his throat. "Nice day."

"Yes, isn't it?"

"Fine dinner."

"Yes, it was."

There was a lengthening silence. She looked straight ahead, though for all the stiffness of her back, small, and a bit fearful.

Whit decided he was making no impression at all, except an adverse one. And then he noticed the way she was holding her hands clasped in her lap, as if she were ashamed of the work-roughened skin and were trying to hide it.

Whit sought out other details about her then. He saw the mended places in her black dress, the careful darning in her shirt-waist with its lace edging, so old that even the strongest soap could not remove the faint tinge of yellow. Her shoes had been rubbed with tallow to soften them, conceal the cracks, and give them a faint sheen.

Cash came in with a noisy clomping of feet. Whit suspected the old man had been spying and had decided the courting was bogging down in a morass of silence.

"Dance in town next Saturday night," Cash said. "Laura might go with her brothers."

Whit saw the touch of color on her face; she bowed her head slightly.

Whit felt unreasonably angry at the old man. He stood up. "Saturday night usually finds me with the loose ends of the week to collect."

He picked up his hat turned to Laura, turning the hat in his hands. "I enjoyed

your company, Miss Laura. Maybe I could tie up those loose ends this Saturday."

ON SATURDAY night, Threadgills livery barn was ablaze with lantern light. Horses were tethered outside in the shadows of buckboards and buggies. Whit sat a moment before dismounting, listening to the music and the basso chant of the dance caller.

When he went inside, he saw Laura almost immediately. She was sitting between her father and mother, with her three huge brothers standing behind them. The boys had their arms folded and were standing like sentinels. It was easy to see why a girl as pretty as Laura wasn't already married off. Who'd want old Cash for a father-in-law? Who'd want to brave the task force of the brothers?

Whit squared his shoulders and walked over. "How are you, Miss Laura?"

"I'm well."

"Would your next dance be spoken for?"

"Not yet, Mr. Marlowe."

There was no warmth or friendliness on her face. Cash covertly nudged her. She rose, took Whit's proffered arm.

She was as light on her feet as a sleek young colt. Her grace overcame Whit's sense of his own clumsiness. Soon he was dancing as he'd never danced before.

Color came to her cheeks; a smile grew on her lips. Her body was light and delicate under his hands. He thought of the week past. Dead, dull time. Last Sunday and tonight time was a living thing.

After the second dance, Clete made a gesture with his head when Whit brought Laura back to her parents. Whit followed Clete outside, the twins following.

In the darkness, Whit heard Clete fumbling about in the bed of a wagon. Clete held up his hand in triumph, holding a gallon jug.

Clete made a display of pulling the cob corking from the jug and wiping the mouth. Then he gravely offered the jug to Whit.

Whit hesitated, understanding the gesture. They were accepting him, respecting him as an honorable man.

The silent brothers ringed him in. He lifted the jug and scorched his mouth with the liquor. Clete grunted, waited for the twins to drink, then tilted the jug himself.

"Jug cost two dollars," Clete remarked.

"And four of us drinking," Whit said. He pulled out a half dollar, slapped it into Clete's suddenly ready palm, pushed between the twins, and stalked back to the dance. Clete's blatant violation of drinking etiquette might have insulted some men; but Whit was beginning to understand the family.

Wednesday afternoon Whit rode over to the Rigsby place. Cash had just finished washing up. He came out on the front porch. They swapped amenities and Whit said, "I want to marry Laura, Cash."

The words seemed to pass over Cash's head. He walked to the edge of the porch, sat down, staring glumly into the distance.

"Did you hear me?" Whit said. "I've worked three days solid building a parlor onto the house to make the place presentable to a wife. Fetched the furniture out from town this very afternoon."

"Don't plague me with trifles now, boy!" Cash said.

"I wouldn't exactly call it a trifle," Whit said stiffly.

"Got my mind on a calf Bo Turner owns," Cash said. "Purebred critter. Real bargain. Improve my stock. But I need another twenty five dollars to buy it."

"Well, about Laura. . ."

"Can't think of nothing, son, until I settle about this calf."

Whit stood with his hands on hips, a good mind to give Cash that seat-warming kick. Then he jerked a thin roll of bills from his pocket and threw twenty five dollars at Cash.

The money did a startling disappearance into the pocket of Cash's jeans. Cash jumped to his feet, laid his hand on Whit's shoulders.

"You're a good man, son-in-law."

"One thing, Cash. I'm not a good horse. I'm marrying Laura, understand? Not the whole family. You're not going to borrow and hog me down to the point where I can't give her the things she needs and deserves."

"Now what's a woman need, son, except a roof and bite to eat?"

Whit slowly pushed Cash's hand from his shoulder. "I guess maybe we better call the whole thing off."

"Now don't be hasty!" Cash grabbed his arm. "I reckon I heard what you said. There won't be any in-law trouble." Cash shrugged. "No matter what else folks say behind my back you'll never find a charge of Cash Rigsby going back on his word—and I've just given you my word."

THE wedding took place Saturday in the Rigsby parlor. Cash gave the bride away. The twins and Clete stood like three stalwart oaks behind their mother.

Parson Hornsby performed the ceremony and the entire retinue followed the newly-weds out to Whit's buggy, which he had shined up for the occasion.

He helped Laura onto the seat, feeling awkward under the pressure of the eyes upon him.

"Goodbye, Laura."

"Goodbye, Mom."

"Hush your crying, woman!" Cash said. "It ain't as if she was going to a foreign country. Don't forget her trunk, Whit."

Whit walked to the porch for the trunk. It was a small, leather, dome-lidded trunk, very old and badly scuffed. He picked it up; the trunk felt as if it had nothing in it. He carried the trunk to the buggy, put it in place behind the seat, and climbed up beside Laura.

He shook the reins. Laura looked over her shoulder watching her family until they were out of sight. Then she looked straight ahead.

Whit listened to the clopping of the horse's hoofs for a mile or better. He stole a glance at his bride.

"I think you'll like the house," he said.

She watched the horse's ears.

He cleared his throat. "Not much of it to keep clean, of course. But we can add a room on now and then."

She looked across the sweeping plain, though nothing of interest moved on the horizon.

Whit tried again. "I've got you a paint pony all gentled and ready to have as your own."

Her eyes showed the merest flicker of interest.

Whit lapsed into silence. She certainly was not one of those females who talked the ears off a man.

Whit was proud of his house. During the weeks he had been here, he had strengthened the foundation, put new shingles on the roof, and whitewashed it, in addition to adding the third room. It was not as large a house as Cash's, but to Whit it was much more homelike, not nearly as barren. Whit had bought a couple of lamps with fancy globes and had even spent much of one evening with his mouth full of pins and his arms loaded with gauzy material, with which he had decorated the windows with some passable curtains.

Laura entered the house with no show of interest. Well, Whit thought, what did I expect her to do—explore every nook and cranny right away?

He had her trunk in his hands. He heeled the front door closed, crossed the parlor, opened a second door.

"This here," he said, "is the bedroom."

She came into the bedroom and stood without looking at him. He put her trunk down in the corner. He stood a moment; but her back was toward him. He guessed she was waiting for him to go out.

He went out and closed the bedroom door behind him. He heard the sound of her footsteps behind the closed door. And a bird was singing outside the window.

Whit did his outside chores and returned to the house to find it warmed with the savory smell of steak simmering in gravy. He washed up, and when he entered the kitchen, the table was set, food waiting for him.

They ate in silence, and when Whit would have helped her wash the dishes, she pushed him to one side.

"You sit in the parlor. This is a woman's chore."

Whit went into the parlor, made himself a cigarette, and listened to her work in the kitchen. She seemed to take a long time with the task.

Finally, she came into the parlor and sat on the edge of the chair across the room. Whit said, "All done?"

"Yes," she said.

"You didn't unpack your trunk yet."

She made no reply.

Whit looked at her with one eyebrow upraised. She was still wearing her wedding clothes, a white starched dress with a choker collar. During preparation of supper, she had protected the dress with the large, white apron Whit had remember to buy and place in the kitchen.

Whit waited, but she seemed to enjoy the silence more than his company.

Can't say she's any too co-operative, Whit thought. He smoked a third and fourth cigarette. "You like to read?"

"Sometimes."

"I got a new book, by Mark Twain."

He picked the book up from the table, lighted a lamp near her, and moved toward her with the book. He bent over her, standing at her side, handing her the book. The warm, sweet smell of her hair rose to him. Then he saw the stiffness in her shoulders and went back to his chair, which occupied a completely lonely corner of the room.

She turned the book idly in her hands but didn't open it.

"Look here, if you miss your family, you can ride over any time to see them. The paint horse is yours to ride where you please."

She turned her head slowly. "I don't miss my family, Mr. Marlowe," she said.

"Well, something's plaguing you."

"I'm tired," she said.

She rose and walked before him into the bedroom. She closed the door and the house was still.

WHIT waited for what he was sure was a proper interval. Then he got to his feet with more noise than was usual for him. He crossed the room to the bedroom door, took the knob in his hand, but the door didn't yield.

Before the addition of the parlor, the bedroom door had been the outer door of the house. She had dropped the heavy wooden bar across the door, locking it from her side.

"Laura?"

She made no sound; and Whit imagined her standing in the middle of the bedroom, fearful as a bird.

"Laura?" he said gently.

"Go to bed, Mr. Marlowe!"

Whit's brows went up; the brusque words carried no taint of bird-like fear.

Whit's lips tightened. "That's just what I'd intended doing, Mrs. Marlowe."

"But not in here!" Whit recognized seething anger born of deep hurt in her voice. She spoke as if all her self-control could no longer hold back words fighting for utterance. "You bought yourself a housekeeper for twenty-five dollars, Mr. Marlowe, but that's all!"

"I'm a pretty damn good housekeeper myself," he said.

"Then perhaps you should have taken your twenty-five dollars to one of those fancy houses in San Antone!"

He felt his cheeks burn. He gave his

muscles no conscious command, but his foot was suddenly raised, slamming against the door like a battering ram.

The door held and that angered him more. He hit the door with his shoulder. Wood splintered and gave. The door ripped from its leather hinges. He staggered into the bedroom and recovered his balance.

She had moved from the flying door. She was pale, but her eyes flashed as she faced him with an unyielding manner.

"Might I trouble you," he inquired, "for the loan of a blanket?"

"They're your blankets, Mr. Marlowe!"

He ripped a blanket from the large, hand-hewn bed, went to the kitchen, and climbed the ladder to the loft. He sat down on the pallet there, took off his boots in darkness and rolled in the blanket.

The straw ticking of the pallet did not remit its usual comfort. It felt lumpy. Whit tossed until the silent earth was bathed in moonglow. He saw the moon through the small loft window.

Whit returned the moon's smile with a scowl.

Before many days had passed, Whit wondered if a man at times mightn't be justified in taking his wife across his knee.

She kept the house spotless; she was the perfect cook; she made soap and stitched the curtains Whit had hemmed with pins. But she was a stranger in the house.

Whit and Lester Vinoy finished dredging the sink just before Lester's old Mexican housekeeper fell and broke her hip. At least, Whit thought, we got the dredging done. Lester won't be able to do anything much now but look after those three kids and the sick housekeeper.

He talked with Laura of improvements he made in his land. She listened, making no comment. It was his land. Just as she was his serf, worth a purchase price of twenty-five dollars.

Whit damned the day he'd given Cash that money, not knowing she was behind them in the parlor, watching because she'd heard his arrival.

When he tried to explain away the twenty-five dollars, she grew more remote than ever, looking at him steadily in a way that made his cheeks burn.

Whit decided that she was thinking down one track and he another; but try as he might, he couldn't understand the strange ways of women and the import they attached to certain words and actions.

The paint horse was a good example. She accepted the gift of the horse with a proper 'thank you', but with no feeling showing in her face. Then later, Whit saw her at the corral. She was smiling, stroking the paint's muzzle, talking to him. For the first time, she seemed really alive.

Now, Whit thought, turning away, I'm jealous of a horse.

HE WAS glad that it was round-up time. A man ate breakfast and supper at home and belt-notches for dinner. He stayed in a saddle until his mind was not so over-active with a sense of rebuff that it tortured itself.

Mull Wooten, who owned the big spread east of Whit, rode over to the herd of mixed brands one day. He was a paunchy man with a leather-colored face that reminded Whit of a map of mountain terrain.

"Dunno if I should ask a gent with a new bride if he wants to leave home for four weeks," Mull said with a grin, "but I'd like for you to sign on to the drive to San Antone. Lester Vinoy has been going in past years, but you know his situation right now. I'll pay you tophand wages and you can market your own beeves independently at shipping point."

"I'll go," Whit said.

Maybe four weeks would give her a change of attitude toward him; at the least he could think the thing out. She had to come out of her shell or go back

to Cash's house; and the thought of the latter alternative touched his mind with panic.

He returned from the drive with only one thought in mind, to hightail for home. If she missed me, he thought, one half as much as I missed her, everything is going to be a little better than all right.

The returning cowpunchers swarmed over Sourroot, arriving early on a Friday afternoon.

Whit heard that Mull Wooten was in the saloon and stopped in there, intending only to bid Mull goodbye and thank him for the help Mull had given in marketing Marlowe cattle.

The saloon was so crowded that Whit had to spend several moments trying to spot Mull. All about Whit was the babble of talk and clink of glasses as cowpokes washed dust from their throat and caught up on local gossip.

He heard somebody down the bar just beyond him chuckling over the story of a woman who slipped from home to another man's house every day. He heard Laura's name and the name of Lester Vinoy, and the man next to him glanced at Whit and suddenly got out of his way.

Whit pushed men aside, and a silence came to the saloon. The man who had talked the gossip was an old range bum named Syl Yadkin. Usually a harmless man good for a joke or tall tale, Syl let his voice trail off as he saw Whit.

From the looks of the bottle before him, Syl was about half drunk; but he sobered fast. He paled beneath his salt-and-pepper beard stubble.

"You're a dog-eating liar," Whit said.

Syl swallowed. "I'm a dog-eating liar."

"You'd tell a tale on your own mother if you thought it was good for a laugh and drink."

"I'd blacken my mother's virtue for a free drink," Syl conceded.

"Every word you just spoke was an untruth."

"Not a word of truth in it," he said.

"Then apologize and eat your words."

"I apologize," Syl said. He glanced at the silent men around him, touched his lips with his tongue. "I'm a dog-eating liar," he repeated.

Whit turned and left the saloon.

He rode fast, but instead of going home, he angled north and drew rein finally on a low rise overlooking Lester Vinoy's house.

He gripped the saddle horn and felt blood leave his face. The paint horse was tethered at Lester's house. As Whit watched, he saw Laura come out of the house,

mount the paint and ride away with a wave of her hand.

His heart was beating so hard he was conscious of its movement against his ribs. He turned his horse and rode home. He reached the house five minutes before Laura. When she arrived, he was standing in the yard, the low afternoon sun hot on his back, her trunk at his feet.

For the first time, she gave him a real smile of warmth. That hurt more than any-

thing and he turned away from it. He touched her trunk with his boot toe. "Lash it to your saddle horn and take it home," he said. "There's no room for it here."

"Whit . . ."

"Or you either."

He went into the house and slammed the door behind him. He was cleaning his gun when he heard her ride away.

TWILIGHT was deepening when Whit drew rein in Lester Vinoy's yard. Lester heard the sound of his arrival and came out of the house, smiling.

Whit crossed his arms on the saddle horn, leaned forward, and looked at Lester. He saw the smile slowly fade. He figured that Lester, with his tallness and wide shoulders and yellow hair, might look pretty good to women. And Lester must get very lonely out here at times, but many men were lonely; that was no excuse.

Lester frowned. "What's on your mind, Whit? The drive go okay?"

Whit said, "I'm going to kill you, Vinoy."

Lester was unarmed. His face went pale. He tried to find a laugh somewhere in himself and bring it to birth. "Killing's never justified, even when a man has wronged you. And I haven't done you any wrong, Whit."

"You've been entertaining my wife behind my back. I've sent her home; and if I intend to stay in this country and hold my head up, I'll have to settle with you."

Lester said carefully, "Now I'm not calling you a liar, Whit, but you've got a mistaken impression. Laura has been here everyday for the past month, true. But as hired house-help. I just couldn't take care of old Maria and get my work done all by myself. Laura said she had some free time and would help out for twenty-five dollars a month. Just why she said twenty-five dollars, I don't know. But she seemed pretty desperate for that sum, and I was glad to have her help. I'd tried old Syl Yadkin as a hired hand, but he got into my jug and was drunk before he'd been here twenty-four hours.

"I don't know what you've heard, Whit. But what I've told you is the plain truth. Your wife hasn't been in a room with me for one minute without old Maria or the kids being there with us. I hesitated when she asked me for the work—but she wanted that twenty-five dollars damn bad. Said there was a special debt she had to pay."

Whit met Lester's gaze squarely; and he sensed that Lester was not lying. It had been as Lester said and Whit knew why she'd wanted the twenty-five dollars.

Whit bowed his head and pulled his bandanna to wipe his face. "Lester, will you let me eat my words and ask your pardon?"

"Why, I don't see any reason why not."

"Thanks," Whit said.

Moonrise found Whit within half a mile of the Rigsby place. He wanted to turn back; he felt as he had when he was a kid and had to go out and cut a keen switch for his father to use on his backside. But he continued on toward the Rigsby place.

Cash answered his knock. "What do you want?" Cash demanded.

"Get out of my way," Whit said.

He saw Laura and her three brothers in the parlor. They turned to look at him, and it seemed to Whit that he had interrupted an argument.

He glanced at Cash. "If you're all giving her old Ned, lay off. It was my fault."

"Ain't give her trouble," Cash said. "Haven't had time. She accused Todd of taking twenty-five dollars of her money."

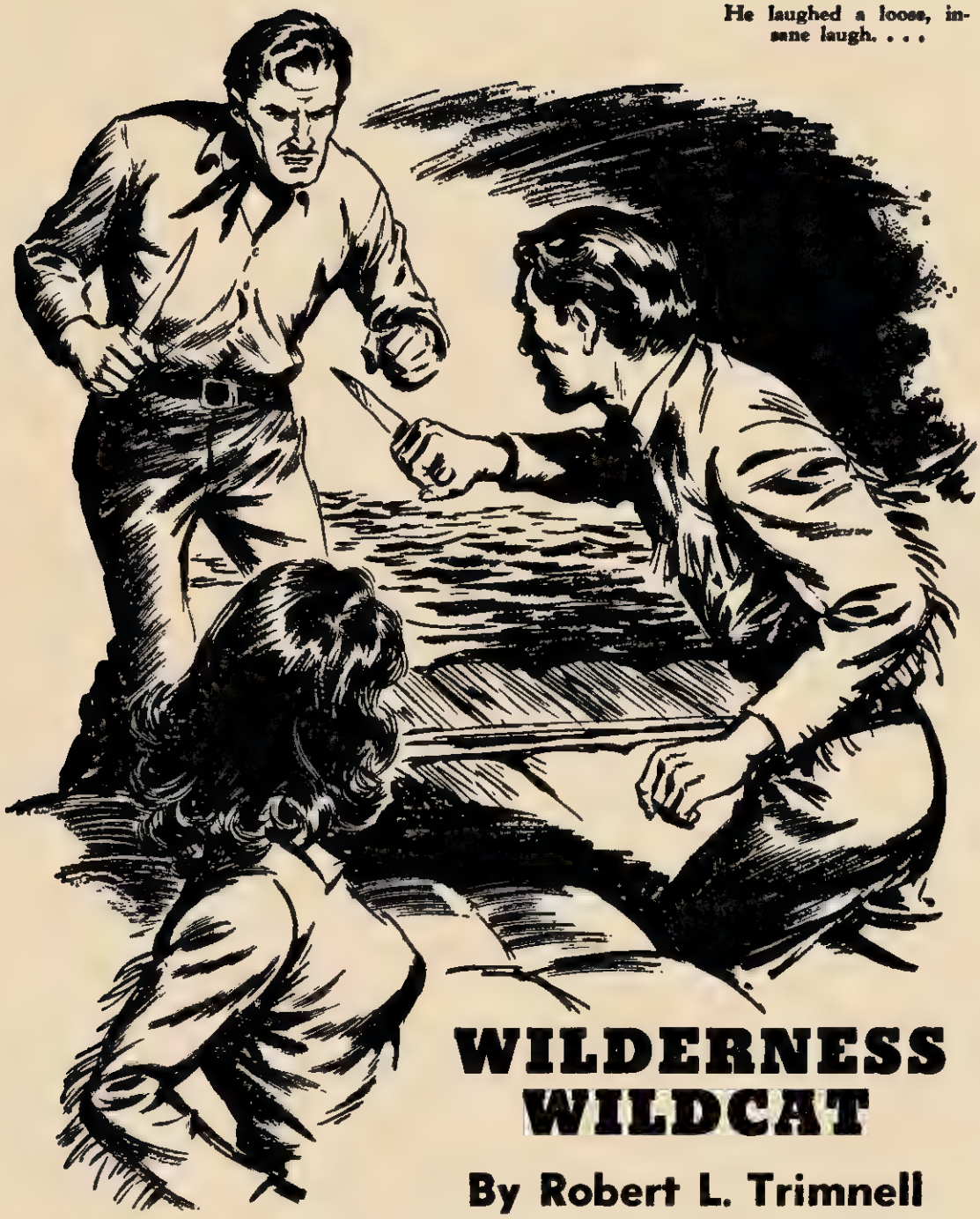
"I saw him open my handbag and take it," Laura said.

"I didn't do it," one of the twins said.

"A little roll of bills tied with a white string," Laura said. "You've got it."

Todd shrugged, started to walk past Whit and go outside. Whit laid his hand on Todd's arm. Todd said, "Take your

(Continued on page 110)



He laughed a loose, insane laugh. . . .

WILDERNESS WILDCAT

By Robert L. Trimnell

One of the two men had three days to live—three days and a hundred miles of river to travel—with a fortune in hides and a gorgeous wilderness temptress as the prize for murder!

DREW EVANS'S hand slid over the breech of the big Sharps rifle, fingered the caps and the trigger, caught the guard, and lifted the eighteen-pound rifle an inch off the raft. His hands were wet and slippery. He wiped them quickly on his buckskinned thighs. Ahead of him, Tagelt was outlined by the setting

sun as he crouched on the bow of the raft. Evans knew that his best chance was to kill the man now. He need only raise the Sharps and blast the man into the river. Just one touch of the trigger. . . .

Only he couldn't do it. There were at least three more days of Indian country, probably four, ahead, and so many rapids that one man could never get the raft through.

Drew Evans shivered. He leaned against the tiller in response to a flip of Tagelt's hand. There was a rock ahead, a stump, shallows. This part of the river was quiet, but there was no sense in subjecting the buffalo-hide lashings to any more strain than necessary. The load of buff hides and furs would make the raft strike like an avalanche. There was a slight bump as the raft nicked the obstacle that Tagelt had motioned him away from.

"Dammit, Evans!" he bellowed. "I pointed you offen that rock!" He turned back and glowered at Drew. His wolfish face was crimson in the setting sun, and his lower lip hung over yellow teeth. He spat and turned back to look ahead.

Drew's lips tightened, and he throated back a retort. He'd thrown the tiller hard over. They struck because Tagelt hadn't warned him in time, just as Tagelt would give no warning when he finally struck. It would be a quick slash of the knife. Then he'd strip off Drew's belt for the silver buckle and maybe his moccasins. They had been chewed soft by a Sioux squaw, Jim Oxford's squaw. There wasn't much else Tagelt'd want. Then, with the belt and moccasins in his hands, he'd roll Drew's body over into the river and turn away without bothering to watch it sink.

That was how Jim Oxford had gone. Drew was sure it had happened that way. The three of them had set out from Fort Mentier du Lac six weeks ago, loaded with their own hides and furs as well as those of the other free trappers and hunters at du Lac. Drew hadn't liked Tagelt from the start. But with Jim Oxford along, he thought they would be safe enough. Tagelt might want to grab the raft load for himself, but he couldn't do much against the two of them.

Then Jim Oxford disappeared. It happened one night while Drew was asleep and they drifted through a broad, easy stretch of the river. Drew awakened when the raft bumped into a small island. Jim Oxford was gone. Tagelt too seemed to have just awakened. He said, "Yuh reckon an Injun pot-shotted him from shore? Arrer, maybe? What with the Sioux stirrin'—hell, that wagon train that we figured to come through a month, two months ago —they sure as hell ran into Sioux. I reckon some sneakin' Sioux arrer pinned into pore Jim."

There was no sign of blood, only the bare tiller, unattended. The next day, however, Drew found the blood markings. Some remained in the cracks in the logs.

AND so now Drew sat with his hand on the rifle, watching Tagelt squatting at the bow of the raft, knowing that one of them must die when they reached the open river below Fourche Longe. He did not bother to wonder what impulse had driven Tagelt to try to get the whole load for himself. He knew that Tagelt was not quite sane. The man had trapped alone this past winter in the half-flooded birch country north of Mentier du Lac. What men did in Spring had ceased to surprise Drew. Three years in the North country had taught him this: in Spring, watch a man's eyes for unsteadiness; listen to his laugh for the telltale quaver; if he drinks whisky, keep your knife loose in the sheath. For there were many like Tagelt coming north now, without the nerves and guts to take this country. Tagelt, he knew, could take no more of it. Perhaps he had been scheming all winter to take enough riches south so that he need never return. And no amount of killing would deter him for an instant.

Tagelt called, "Evans! What you see off to the right bank?"

Drew glanced to the willow-fringed bank. A movement there had disturbed him a moment ago. He'd taken it for a trick of the falling sun. Now he saw a flash as though someone were waving a blanket. A ripple of movement.

Someone signaling," he said.

"Injuns. Nobody in the bend but Sioux. Layin' bait." Tagelt chuckled. "Steer over close. They got nothin' long range to shoot with. I'll give 'em a snort of old Sharps' medicine. Still flappin' that thing. G'wan, steer over. It's smooth water, and we won't get hung up. Take us to Sharps range."

Drew leaned on the tiller, and the raft drifted slowly across the current. Noting the trim, rock-lined shore, he reckoned the current had found a deep spot there, and rolled over directly to it. Soon he could feel the drag of it, and he straightened the tiller. The river bore them directly toward the shore.

"Don't shoot until we see who it is," Drew called.

Tagelt had rested his Sharps on a bale of buffalo hides, screwed down the caps, and sighted. "Hell, got to shoot afore they do." He jammed his cheekbone against the rifle stock and squeezed off a shot. The powerful gun rocked him back, and smoke puffed before the rifle; from the shore, Drew heard a faint, shrill scream.

Tagelt was laughing. He had no fear of Indians, as long as the river was broad and their two heavy Sharps were mounted on the broad, steady raft. They could fire a dozen times before any Indian rifle was within range.

The blanket flapped frantically, and now they heard a voice crying out, but it was too distant to understand what was said. Tagelt swore. It wasn't going as he'd expected. He cranked the breech open and reloaded. He bent down for another shot.

"Don't shoot!" Drew yelled at him.

"Shet up. Lead medicine's good for Injuns."

Drew left the tiller and raced forward between the stacked hides. Tagelt glimpsed him coming, and his eyes flicked. He swung the rifle around, but Drew was against the barrel before the muzzle was pointed at him. He caught Tagelt's greasy leather shirt in his fist and twisted, holding the man against the hide bundle. He saw Tagelt's mouth draw down, exposing his long, yellowed teeth. For a long moment they stared at each other. Now it was open and plain between them. One would kill the other. The moment of death waited only upon the river. When the river allowed, there would be long skinning knives, a long pole sweeping around at another man's head, or the angry crash of a Sharps.

As they stared at each other, the cries from shore became clearer. The words sounded like. "Help me." But of that Drew could not be sure. One thing he did know: it was the voice of an almost hysterical woman.

They broke apart. Tagelt must have recognized the voice too, for his face drew down, empty with surprise. Drew ran back to the tiller and drove it over, pushing them to the very edge of the stream. He could see now that the woman was flapping a piece of cloth at them, and he could make words out of her hysterical crying. Tagelt came back now with his Sharps, yelling, "Injun trap—we ain't goin' in close."

"Take the tiller. I'm going to swim in. Cover me with the rifle." Drew kicked off his moccasins, threw his shirt and hat down on the deck, and dove into the water. It was chill water for so late in the season, but helped spur him on. He swam hard, digging at the water without looking up, until he'd covered a hundred yards. Then he saw the woman standing on the rock, facing him, with the cloth loose in her hands. He looked back at the raft and saw Tagelt's lank form leaning against the tiller, but tensed, ready to fire.

He thought, this better be quick, before Tagelt decides to run off. But Tagelt couldn't do that. There were too many rapids before they reached Fourche Longe. Yet, Tagelt must be wishing he could be rid of him as easily.

NOW he was close enough to see the girl. Her clothes were torn, her hair wild. She wore no shoes. The cloth she flapped at them had been her tattered skirt. She held it in front of her now. As he came closer he saw that her eyes were sunken, her cheeks thin. He gulped a lungful of air and called, "If you can swim, start toward me."

She looked blankly at him, not understanding. She sat down on the rock as though her legs had suddenly refused to support her. The skirt fell from her hands into the river and slowly drifted away. She watched it go. That seemed to give her the idea. She climbed down the rock into the river and paddled awkwardly toward him. When they met, she clawed frantically for support, gasping, "You aren't an—Indian?"

Her eyes were wild, bulging blue.

He said, "No, I'm a white man, a hunter."

She fainted dead away then, and he had to drag her, swimming with one hand, back to the raft.

"Don't that beat hell," Tagelt grunted. "A purty girl like that, runnin' around all alone in Injun country?"

The first gray of dawn was coming. The girl still slept, rolled up in Drew's blanket. She had not opened her eyes since coming on the raft. In spite of the thinness of her face and the scars where thorns and brush had torn her skin; she had pretty lines to her face. A good jaw and a straight nose. Drew liked that. But he didn't like the way Tagelt had remarked on her prettiness.

He turned and saw the man's lower lip hanging loose and wet, and his eyes narrowed on the girl. Drew growled, "Don't get any ideas, Tagelt. Keep your paws off her."

Tagelt's silver-gray eyes flashed around to him. He sneered, "You got first call?"

Drew's hand involuntarily slid down toward the skinning knife stuck in his waistband. He saw Tagelt's do the same. Slowly, creeping fingers writhing with hate wormed down their chests and bellies to their knife hilts.

But Drew stopped himself in time. He snapped, "There's rapids up there. Feel the current taking the raft?"

"I feel it." Tagelt's hand wormed over his knife hilt.

"Get up on the bow with a pole. You want to bust up the raft—lose the hides?"

Mention of the hides stirred Tagelt. He swung around and hurried forward, grabbing up the long ash pole and swinging it out ahead. He yelled, "Take her left, left!"

Drew threw himself against the sweep, and saw Tagelt ram the pole out at a rock. The raft groaned, swung left, and thumped. The blow almost pitched Tagelt overboard, but he balanced like a cat, and snared his fingers in a bale of hides, and held on as the raft rocked through to even water.

So again, as they averted collision with the rock, they'd stopped before their knives were out. But it had been a very near thing.

Drew saw now that the girl's eyes were opening as sunlight came. He saw too that tears were streaming down her cheeks. She looked over at him, and regarded him steadily for some minutes. She started to get out of the blanket, then looked down at herself and drew the blanket tight with a sudden cry.

Drew said, "I hung out my other buckskins and a shirt there behind the stacks. You can put them on. I don't reckon I've got extra moccasins, though."

She smeared the tears from her face, gathered the blanket about her, and crawled off to the far edge of the raft where the

bundles of hides made a space of privacy. While she was gone Drew built a fire there on the box of wetted earth they kept for the purpose, made coffee, and pan-fried a steak from the deer that Tagelt had shot yesterday. Flour supplies at du Lac had been so short they'd brought none, just some jerked meat to splice out the game they shot on the way. But there was plenty of game, and they'd begun to catch fish the last weeks, too. They were used to a meat diet.

When at last the girl appeared, she looked much improved. She'd straightened her hair out somehow, though she had no comb, and though very thin, her face looked rested. She gulped the coffee down greedily. Drew offered her his knife to eat the steak with, but she shook her head. "I've been hungry—too long." She seized it up and tore off hunks with her teeth. The way she went at it, Drew decided it wouldn't be enough, so he cut out another steak from the carcass and fried it. It wasn't yet done when she asked for it. He grinned. She was as indifferent as a hunter about whether meat was hot through.

When she was done she washed her hands in the river and then sat for a long time with her face held in her hands. Drew did not bother her; her story would come, and, until then, she must rest as she best could. After an hour sitting there, she returned to the blanket and slept all morning.

It was now, Drew guessed, less than three days to Fourche Longe.

THAT evening she seemed more relaxed and her face already plumper. She ate ravenously. She said she'd eaten nothing but berries and sprouting hazelnuts for weeks. She didn't know exactly how long.

"We were headed for Mentier du Lac—five wagons. We were going to settle there. The first we knew of the Indians was a grass fire that suddenly panicked our horses. It was—I can't think of it—they were all running and upsetting wagons, and naked Indians running everywhere shooting and—hatcheting—I was running and got lost in the smoke—I was burned. They didn't seem to see me. I just ran. I don't know why they didn't catch me. I saw some fires that night, and I thought maybe they were the wagons burning. It was a long ways off. That was weeks ago—I—then I saw your raft. I didn't think Indians used rafts." She shook her head. "I don't even want to talk about it. My name is Jean Miller."

Drew could see she wouldn't want even to think about it. He knew what the Sioux did to whites when they were on the warpath. Maybe she wasn't telling everything she saw. He hoped she'd seen no more than that.

He told her how they were taking the winter's haul of hides and furs downriver to Jeune Crossing, which was a week more of rafting. She was pleased. That was where the wagon party had set out from, and she knew people there. So she sat against a bale of hides with her knees drawn up, and her arms circling them, smiling and trying to forget the terror that she'd endured. She'd eaten three big meals during the day, but now she asked for something more. Drew did the cooking for her, and as soon as she'd eaten, she fell asleep.

They tied up on the bank at dark. There was rough water ahead, so they hunted a place where trees hung down, feathery with new leaves, over the water. They tied rawhide strips fore and aft to tree trunks, long strips, single strand, so they could be easily cut if they needed to leave hurriedly. Tagelt said he'd take the first watch. He slipped off into the brush to scout for sign. Drew had given the girl his blanket, so he used a buffalo hide.

He lay there and thought pleasurably of the girl's arrival. He liked talking to her. It took his mind off the certainty that he or Tagelt must die after they reached Fourche Longe. He thought of the vivacity that

showed in her eyes, even as sunken as they still were, and the spots of color that would flash up into her cheeks. After she was settled with the friends she mentioned in Jeune Crossing, it would be nice to call on her. She'd look pretty in a proper dress, he thought. They had dances there at Jeune Crossing, too.

Thinking of her, he decided he wanted to put the north country behind him—and have a girl—her, or some girl like her, and a place maybe around Jeune Crossing. Maybe he'd get restless later, but he'd been up here three years—since he was eighteen—and he longed for civilization.

The girl had brought that feeling to him strongly. He smiled as he thought of her, feeling better tomorrow and probably moving around the raft as lightfooted as anything and smiling. She'd be giving a hand with the cooking soon. She could even help pole.

For a moment the meaning of that did not quite come to him. She could pole or handle the tiller, after a couple of days. She could probably handle a rifle, too. His eyes went wide open. He heard a crackle out in the brush. His hand stole to his belt and gripped his knife handle. There was another crackle out there, coming closer. That would be Tagelt coming back.

He broke out in a sweat. Tagelt could kill him now. He remembered the way the man had looked at her, with his eyes narrowed and his lower lip hanging loose. Tagelt wanted her. And he could use her to work in Drew's place.

Drew looked quickly about. He was at the bow end, hidden from the rear of the raft by the hide stacks. It was very dark, though there were some stars coming out into the velvet sky. He felt the raft lurch slightly, as a man stepped onto it. Dead bark on the logs crackled.

Drew's hand shot over to his rifle. But it was not cocked. If Tagelt was coming with his gun ready, his would be cocked. If Drew cocked, Tagelt would be upon him before he could swing the heavy gun up. He heard the stealthy step coming toward him. In a moment, the muzzle of the Sharps would peer around the stacks of hides.

Drew slipped out from under the buffalo skin. There was only one escape from the approaching Sharps. The river. Quickly, he swung around and eased his feet in, his legs, into the cold water. He slid down and under the raft.

HE PULLED himself through by grabbing rough parts of the logs underneath, and came out on the other side of the raft. He lay on his back, still underneath, and let his nose, and only his nose, come up against the log. He breathed quietly as he could, then ducked back again. He crawled along until he found a patch of marsh grass up against the logs. There he dared to come up and peep out, and breathe again.

"Drew! Where the hell you go?" Tagelt was whispering hoarsely. There was a tremor in his voice. This wasn't as he wanted it. He stood there outlined against the night with the Sharps in his hands.

Drew slipped along until he came to the rawhide holding the raft to the bank. He dragged out his knife and slashed the leather. Then he worked back to the other rawhide, and cut it. He ducked beneath a jagged-cut log at the stern of the raft, where the cutting had left enough projection over the water to hide his face. He lay there and floated, hearing Tagelt growl and curse. Then Tagelt cried, "Girl, you see where he went?"

Jean answered, startled, "He went? You mean he's gone?"

"None of your damn, lyin'! Tell me where he went!"

Drew's lips tightened. He heard her protests, then the thud of a blow and Tagelt's startled cry as he found the raft moving. He rushed back to the sweep, and Drew saw it push right, turning them in

toward shore. Tagelt would be leaning against it, rifle still ready in his hands. He heard Tagelt yell, "Girl, git a pole, might be rocks ahead."

"But where's Drew?" she cried. "Turn ashore, we've got to get him."

"Good riddance," Tagelt laughed. "We won't see him ag'in. He got skeered and run off. Git on the pole, girl."

"No! I can swim ashore—I'll go—"

Drew saw the sweep swing loose as Tagelt left it. He heard moccasins scuffle and the girl cry out. Drew took the blade of his knife in his teeth and hauled himself up the side of the raft, landing on his knees, snatching the knife out of his mouth. He saw Tagelt kick the girl off into the aisle between the hide bales, saw her fall, clutching her bruised side.

Tagelt turned and leaped aft for the sweep. The rifle was in his left hand, his right reaching for the sweep. Then he saw Drew.

Tagelt's eyes bulged, and he screamed his rage. He swung the eighteen-pound rifle up as though it were a toy, clawed at the trigger. Drew was rushing in then, stabbing a frantic hand at the rifle barrel to knock it aside.

It seemed to explode in his face, a great hot blast with yellow balls hammering in his head and the side of his face stabbed by bits of burning powder. He reeled back before the shock of it, and at that moment the raft lurched, and he went down.

Dazed, he tried to scramble up, saw that the kick of the loosely-held gun had knocked Tagelt down also. Tagelt let the gun go, jerked his skinning knife from the sheath.

"You ain't no knife-fighter, boy!" he laughed. "Yuh bit off mor'n you c'n chaw, this time!"

The unattended tiller was swinging wildly now and the raft spinning in the current. Tagelt paid it no attention. He rose, catlike, and came across the lurching raft with his knife low and pointing up, his wrist twisted. He laughed, a loose, insane laugh.

Drew moved quickly in, his knife-blade flicking. Tagelt stabbed out with a long thrust. Only a violent pitch of the raft kept the blade from reaching. Again Tagelt slashed, this time the knife point cutting a long streak up Drew's arm. Tagelt howled with glee.

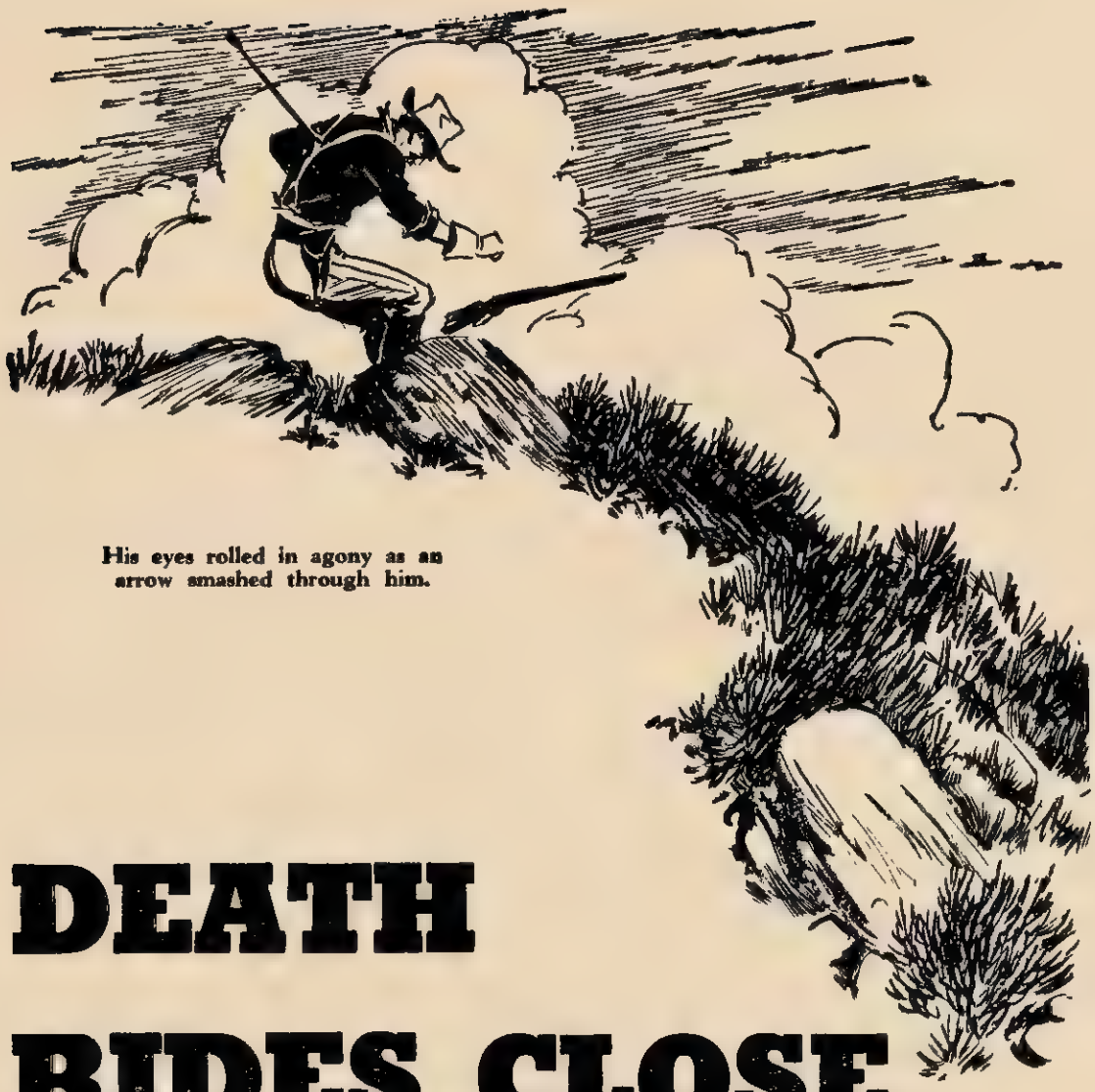
Then came the girl's sharp scream of warning, and the raft struck. The blow of logs on rock almost hurled Drew overboard. Water splashed up over the raft in a heavy wave. Then a flying body crashed into Drew and bowled him over, off the raft, and into the whirling water.

When he came up, Jean was clinging to his shirt. He saw, against the sky, Tagelt standing there grabbing the tiller, and he saw a great foam of white water ahead.

For a moment they saw him against the sky, a lank black figure struggling with the sweep and screaming curses. Then the raft seemed to explode against a rock. A log leaped up into the air and the man's arms flailed at it, until it crushed him down on a rock as a stone might crush a spider. Part of the raft stuck there against the rocks, and was still there when the current dragged Drew and Jean up to it and held them tight.

All the next day they dragged logs and hide packs out of the pool below the rapids, and patched together a raft of sorts, and a hide catch of sorts. Then they went carefully on down the river. It rained the second day, and the rain seemed to wash the feel of blood, of hate, of greed, from the raft. Then the sun shone brightly again. When at last Jeune Crossing was in sight, he stood at the tiller and she stood on the other side, one hand resting shyly on his arm.

He knew that in Jeune Crossing she wouldn't have long to stay with her friends there. For he had plans for this girl and himself in the sunny valley that rose about the river ahead. ★ ★ ★



His eyes rolled in agony as an arrow smashed through him.

DEATH RIDES CLOSE

By Frank P. Castle

THE sun was bright, this spring afternoon, but a breeze moderated its heat. A creek chuckled merrily, here in this far lonely reach of the *llano,* splashing past a rocky ford; birds sang in creek timber, which sighed gently, stirred by the wind. A pretty, beguiling picture—and then the scene beyond the ford, in a narrow creek meadow this side of the eastern bank, came into view.

A scene of smoldering ruin—burned wagons, slaughtered stock . . . and, for a dozen humans, what had been a lingering death that was indescribable. Wayne Tilman, reining down his horse, felt shock strike through him. His throat muscles corded and his stomach turned over with a sickening wrench.

Beside him, Sergeant Dan McGraw swore in helpless, grating fury. This man inured to violence, a veteran of the trackless vastness that was Comanche empire, was

It took a hundred blood-crazed Comanches and the gleam of a white shoulder through the willows to show Wayne Tilman that the honkatonk girl was the one he wanted at his side—for ever!

visibly shaken as he saw the dead sprawled in rigid anguish that eloquently told how they had died. The deepening seams in his leathery face mirrored his bitter emotion. "Wayne! That's what's left of a white woman yonder, still staked out—"

"I see her," Wayne Tillman said, dismounting. "Cover me, Dan, in case any of the devils are still hanging around."

He went at a hurried pace across the meadow, removing his fringed riding jacket as he moved, and bent to cover that pitiful figure.

White and young—Elinor Tilman, his brother's wife; it had to be, even though he had never seen her in life and there was no way to tell for sure now. The sickness churned in him again. Had her sin been a thousand times blacker, he would never have wished such an end for the woman.

McGraw had also dismounted, and followed him. "It's Nick Soltau's outfit," the sergeant said. "Another Comanchero who came out of Santa Fe into the *llano* once too often. When will they ever learn that the high profits they make, trading with those red monsters, always bring them to an end just like this?" And then, "That's Nord Wilmette's body, over there."

"I know," Tilman said. Wilmette, tinhorn gambler and ladies' man, who had persuaded Elinor to run away with him, had not been disfigured as much as the others. He turned to the sergeant. "Dan, the way you talk makes me think you must have guessed I was hunting him—and the woman."

"No guess, boy; I knew it from the first. Such news travels fast. When your brother Asa stumbled on them, that night over at Cruces as they were starting to leave together, and took Wilmette's bullet, I think the whole territory was talking about it next morning, and betting whether you'd catch up with them; everybody assumed you'd take their trail. I was on another patrol out of Tiburon, and the brush telegraph brought us the whole story, even up in the hills."

The two of them turned back toward McGraw's command, five troopers, very worn from a week of detached patrolling in this dangerous land. They sat their horses at the ford; one, young and green-faced, was struggling not to retch at what he saw. "Light and start digging graves," McGraw ordered. "And if you don't want the same treatment you can see plain before you, grow eyes in the backs of your heads and don't make one careless move."

Wayne Tilman went to his horse, unsheathed his Spencer and cocked it. The stream murmured pleasantly. A thick motte of willows and cottonwods stood yonder, where the creek curved; the banks were high and rocky, close together, on southward. Yes, a nice pleasant afternoon. No sort of a day to die, but hideous death had flowered right here, only scant hours ago. A grim thought flickered in him; he wondered if somewhere an entry in a book might soon be closed: Wayne Tilman, born 1840, in Texas—murdered by Comanches, 1870 . . . in Texas . . .

McGRAW spoke again, beside him once more. "Got to ride on quick, try to make contact with Captain Coker; he should be with the rest of the troop, a day or so south . . . Guess you were trailing Soltau when we met up yesterday—and that the reason you weren't pleased to see us was that you already knew Soltau had Wilmette and the woman along?"

"Her name was Elinor, Dan," Tilman said. "Yes, I knew. Wilmette paid Soltau to ride with his wagons—wanted to get east, out of New Mexico."

"Well—you'd better stick with us. This isn't any time to be travelling on the *llano* by yourself, even if you're in a hurry to get back to Cruces and your brother."

"You've been out of touch with the talk lately, Dan. I had word at Santa Fe, a week ago, that Asa was dead."

The lines in Sergeant Dan McGraw's face grew deeper. He did not comment. He and Wayne Tilman had been friends a long time; there was no need for words between them.

"Sure, I'll stick," Tilman went on. "How do you rate our chances of getting through to Coker and the troop?"

"I'd say about one in ten."

"You're figuring too low. This was a big war party here, mixed Comanches and Kiowas, I think, probably a big chief leading it. Maybe it was Satank himself—and if so, we're up against the smartest of them all—"

His voice chopped off and he whipped around, lining his rifle at that thick timber. A pistol leaped into McGraw's hand; his sharp order slashed through the crunching sound of earth being turned: "Hit cover! Somebody's yonder among those trees!"

Wayne Tilman went forward, crouching a little. He saw the figure appear at the edge of the timber, hesitate there—saw fair hair in disarray, pale smudged features, rumpled blouse and breeze-stirred skirt.

The young trooper's voice sounded: "Glory be! She's white and young and pretty!"

Tilman had halted. Amazement held him for a moment, that anyone could have escaped this slaughter here. Then another emotion claimed him. His rifle still pointed at her, and what he was feeling must have showed, for McGraw struck it, driving the muzzle earthward. "I'll have no foolishness, Wayne!"

"Damn you, Dan—!" Then he shook himself. What he had been thinking wasn't possible. It couldn't be.

And yet—fair hair, pale skin, blue eyes, slender figure . . . this was the description Asa's Mexican housekeeper at Cruces had given him. The description of his brother's wife.

McGraw had reached the woman, hand out. She took it and leaned against him a moment, shuddering as she looked toward Soltau's camp.

"All—dead?" Her voice was husky, ragged.

"Afraid so," the sergeant told her gently. "How did you manage to escape?"

"Last night, just at sunset," she said, voice firming, "I went for a walk, by myself, stopped in those trees. I liked it there, the quiet and peace . . . guess I had been there several hours when the—the attack came. It was still light."

Wayne was listening tautly.

"And—?" McGraw prompted.

"I found a pile of brush and burrowed under it," the woman said. "I put my hands over my ears, but I couldn't shut out the—the noise. It went on all night. I guess I must have dozed off, along about dawn; your talking woke me up." She moistened her lips. "That—other white woman—?"

"Killed quick," McGraw lied.

Her head bent and her lips quivered. "Poor thing; I felt sorry for her. A dance-hall girl from somewhere in the Territoy, I heard . . ."

There was a suffocating tightness in Wayne Tilman's throat. McGraw wheeled toward him, and Tilman frowned angrily. "We've trouble enough, Dan; I'm not planning to make any more."

McGraw nodded slowly. To the woman, he said, "Who are you?"

Her head came up. She looked at Tilman. Something seemed to flicker momentarily in her eyes, mirroring a rush of hurried, anxious thought, perhaps; it might be she saw in the big, dark-faced man who stood before her a shadow of resemblance to another man, Asa Tilman, left in the doorway of his own ranch-house with a bullet in his chest, while his faithless wife, Elinor, ran with Nord Wilmette, who had fired it.

Then she met Tilman's searching stare with steadiness. "My name," she said, "is Elinor Wilmette."

CHAPTER TWO

Sudden Death

THE act of burial done, they rode, staying in the bed of the shallow creek, one man in the van and another scouting warily along the east bank afoot. This made a horse available for the woman to ride.

McGraw had a level warning for Tilman, before they mounted. "If we get to Coker, Wayne, so does she."

"Of course. Don't be a fool, Dan," Tillman growled. "And don't go grabbing at my gun again. I had a bullet notched for Wilmette—none for her."

"Yeah? Just what did you mean to do with her when you caught them?"

Tilman was silent. After a moment, McGraw went on: "I'll tell you something plain—you're the fool. Anybody is who hunts vengeance. Look what it brought you. Instead of being on your place over beyond Estancia, you're in this back pocket of nowhere, Kiowas and Comanches around us thicker than sand fleas, chances high we'll get what Soltau and those with him got."

"No use talking about it now. Let's ride," Tilman said.

Sure, he had been hunting vengeance, and had no regret for the course he had taken. He had known it was rash to ride into the *llano* alone, with this already a bad year out in its vastness where Comanches and Kiowas were restlessly, murderously on the move. But if Wilmette's trail had led right into Satank's camp, he would still have followed it.

He had spent a week around Santa Fe, hunting for Wilmette and the woman—had received simultaneously news of Asa's death and word that those two had gone east with Soltau, a Basque who traded with the Comanches for loot they picked up in Texas. He had followed at once. He had not been pleased at encountering McGraw and the troopers yesterday, regretted fiercely now that he had not been alone when the woman revealed herself.

Tilman had spoken truthfully to Dan McGraw; he had not consciously planned a bullet for Elinor. Some other punishment was needed for such as she. Just what, he didn't know. But it would come to him. If and when they got through to Coker and the troop he commanded, the responsibility McGraw had assumed would end. And Wayne Tilman would deal with her then.

His gaze fixed bitterly on the woman as they rode, working at a slow pace, with tension constantly increasing, down the creek. And, as the day waned, he felt wonderment growing within himself.

She was showing not only fortitude, in a situation which would have been almost unbearable for any woman, but a sort of gaiety that obviously eased the worry and dread that rode with McGraw and his men. She had the knack of making jokes from small things; she teased the young trooper until his ears were flaming. The boy liked it, and so did the others. Laughter was good, at such a time, and they were laughing frequently.

McGRAW rode for a while beside her. Then he dropped back to where Tilman was covering the rear, a favorite spot for Comanche attack. "The dead dance-hall girl was named Alice Grimes. You ever hear of her?"

"No," Tilman answered shortly.

McGraw nodded ahead, toward the woman. "She's seared, bad scared—what she heard last night is still ringing in her head. But she's got the grit to tamp it down and make my boys laugh. Surprise you?"

Yes. He was surprised. He had formed a mental picture of Elinor, from the descriptions given him—a woman shallow and self-centered; she had been extravagant in her purchases of fine clothes, had hated the land and everything about it, to the extent of refusing to learn even the rudiments of Spanish so she could deal with the servants.

This woman did not quite fit that picture. Still, he had also learned she was wily and clever. Likely, she was now pretending—with stress, he would see her as she really was.

"Dan," he said, "better relieve that fellow up on the bank; he's starting to tire."

McGraw nodded, leaving him to send another trooper up the still steep and rocky creek bank. Then there was a shout from the man riding in the van; Tilman spurred forward with the sergeant.

A sizeable bunch of Indians had crossed the creek here, from west to east, sometime this morning. Tilman found a discarded, broken lance, McGraw a roughly woven basket. Together, they examined them.

"Kiowa lance, Comanche weaving," Tilman said. "A mixed bunch from both tribes, all right."

"Add these to the outfit that wiped out Soltau's people, and you've got a big war-party," McGraw said. "Some big chief is on the prowl. Maybe like you said it's Satank himself."

"Set-ankeah—Sitting Bear. I ran into the old devil in '66, near the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos, bringing a herd up from Texas," Tilman said. "Blooded his bucks, that time; he's got no cause to remember me with any favor."

"Let him catch us, we'll lose our hides and get salted down with red-hot coals," McGraw growled. "What'd happen to the woman I won't even put tongue to. We'd better get along south in a hurry."

"Not yet a couple of minutes," Tilman said. And, as McGraw frowned at him, "Remember their trick of leaving a few bucks to watch the back trail whenever they cross water, picked up when they found the cavalry often rides down a creek bed, like you're doing?"

"I forgot," McGraw muttered. "I'll spread my boys out afoot for some looking. You stay with the stock, Wayne."

He went away at his stumpy stride, calling terse orders. Tilman bent at the water's edge to cup a drink in his hand. Part of McGraw's bunch was going up the east bank, the others were wading the creek, searching a stand of brush that fringed the water-course there. Tilman saw the woman nearby, studying him.

She spoke, quietly: "Why do you dislike me?"

He had been aware of the fact that his presence with the troopers puzzled her—had noticed the glances she sent back to him. The way he felt must have communicated itself to her.

Tilman lifted his Navy Colt from its holster and checked the weapon, still keeping attention fixed on that eastern bank. The woman continued: "I've been trying to remember whether we ever met before—whether I have done you any hurt. And I can't."

This made him snort inwardly. True, only McGraw here knew him, and the sergeant was not one to discuss a friend and his problems with troopers. None of them knew he was a Tilman.

However, Dan had used his first name, with the troopers in a position to hear; the woman by now must have heard it herself. And at times in the past Asa must have mentioned his brother, Wayne, whom the boy seldom saw, since his big spread north and west of Estancia was some distance from Asa's place at Cruces. Their paths had not crossed much, these three years past; Wayne had been often on the road to and from Texas, bringing herds for Army delivery at Fort Sumner—he had been absent on such a venture when Asa was married. And the boy had been gone to Santa Fe on a wedding trip when Wayne Tilman rode through Cruces, returning; in the year of Asa's marriage he had never met his brother's wife.

Now he said, coldly: "This is no time or place for discussing such a matter."

"Why not?" she asked. And then: "if you're one of the men I have known—if

you feel I wheedled money from you and gave nothing in return—"

She caught herself, in some confusion. Oddly, this news of men before Asa, serving to confirm his opinion of her tawdriness, gave Tilman no feeling of satisfaction. Instead, it depressed him.

A hail interrupted them. It was a trooper up on the east bank. "Where's the sarge?"

Tilman pointed with his thumb, northward.

"Well, tell him it's clear yonder," the man said, with a wave of his hand toward the east. "I'll work down-creek a little, and—"

Then his mouth flew wide and his eyes rolled up in agony as an arrow smashed through him, back to front, with an ugly chunking sound, its head showing as it broke out high in his chest. His hands started to lift, but never reached it. He pitched off the bank and down, in a slack, heavy fall.

A frantic yell sounded—that kid trooper, somewhere eastward. Tilman grabbed his Spencer and sprinted toward the bank. The woman came with him, skirts lifted high. He clawed his way up over a loose clay slide. A carbine cracked three times, fast; there was a scream of pain, then exultant gobbling cries. Tilman swung his arm at the woman. "Get back!"

She made no sound, coming on after him. He put his head over the bank. The kid was on his belly, trying to crawl, legs dragging like dead weight; a painted buck was bounding fast toward him with a knife, yelling his claim to the coup. Tilman hit him twice, at thirty yards, knocked him into a kicking heap.

An arrow sang shrilly and dug into dirt right in front of his nose. A Comanche calling card, they termed it with grim humor in the *llano;* another buck, low on a sorrel mustang, was coming at a fast run from his right, showing only a leg and the glitter of dark eyes as he notched another arrow to the string of a short bow. Tilman led him with care, shot him off his horse, then put two more bullets into him.

He went up over the bank, then, pacing warily toward the downed trooper. The woman ran past, settling with a flurry of skirts to cradle the kid's head in her lap. Tilman bent for a look and shook his head, tightlipped. The boy had taken a bullet in the spine. He was done.

Tilman said harshly, to the woman, "Get back down that bank. There's likely another one—"

She only looked at him, hand gently soothing the kid's pallid cheek. Tilman shrugged and left her.

HE WAS remembering those three fast bullets from a carbine. The troopers carried single-shots, doled by a niggardly government; only Indians and men like himself owned repaters, in this country. The buck who had fired it must still be on the prowl. Tilman swung toward a stand of scrub oak, hurriedly re-loading as he moved, and started raking the timber with lead. He flushed out the third one, this Comanche wearing a blue coat from the back of some murdered soldier. Its brass was bright in the sun, and he must be a sub-chief, to own such a trophy.

The Indian flourished his rifle, firing fast from the back of another scrub mustang. Tilman sighted with cold care and killed him with one bullet, then went to pick up the repeater.

He turned back. McGraw, coming at a run, stopped and grunted his thanks as Tilman handed him the Comanche's rifle. "One dead; the kid might as well be," McGraw said. "You think you accounted for all those skulkers?"

"Reasonably sure. Not much comfort in that, though. Word about us is pretty certain to reach Satank soon, one way or another."

McGraw nodded somber agreement. They came together to the bank. A couple

of the other troopers were easing the hurt kid down it. The woman was sliding along with him, clinging fast to the boy's hand.

There was nothing that could be done for him, and he couldn't be left here. They tied the youth in saddle, and the woman swung her horse alongside his. "Lean against me," she said, arm reaching out to him, pulling his head against her breast.

He grinned feebly, cracking a wan joke: "Worth taking a bullet, for this—"

She looked at Wayne Tilman, something in her eyes that sounded a reluctant, responsive chord within him. Tilman went slowly to his horse, trying to reconcile what she had done and was doing now, with the woman who had stood by while Nord Wilmette put a bullet into his brother, then had left Asa to run away.

Dan McGraw said, "Got to push on, Wayne. They usually won't attack when light's gone, and we might make it to where Coker's waiting by sometime after sun-up tomorrow, if we ride hard."

"It'll be light tonight, Dan—a Comanche moon," Tilman said.

CHAPTER THREE

First Strike

IT WAS hard going for tired animals and men, a slow stumbling progress along a creek bed that grew increasingly more rocky and narrow. For a brief time blackness was thick and muffling. Then the moon rose, a pallid full moon, filling this lonely land with ghostly radiance. A Comanche moon; the horse Indians of these wild plains often used its light to strike during the night hours.

Tilman heard the woman talking softly to the hurt young trooper, crooning to him —songs about the Wabash, the Swanee, of green hills far away, full of nostalgia for all these men with death riding as saddle partner. The puzzlement in Tillman concerning her increased.

At midnight, McGraw called a halt. Tilman stopped by the woman's horse. He spoke gruffly: "How's the boy making out?"

Her answer was quiet, but ragged with fatigue: "Fighting to hang on."

A useless thing, trying to keep him alive; Tilman almost said so. Then he saw the straightness of her back, silhouetted by moonlight, the resolute lift of her chin, and discovered in surprise that he was reluctantly touching hat-brim with hand as tribute.

McGraw spoke, voice crackling, "Over here, Wayne! Take a look—"

It was far off across the prairie, a ruddy star winking where earth met sky, twelve or fifteen miles away, eastward.

"Big fire," Tilman muttered. "Big party yonder, Dan. They're waving the hair taken from Soltau and his bunch, drinking the pop-skull whiskey out of his wagons. And that camp's too close. We've got to move faster."

McGraw said, "We can't. That hurt kid—"

"I said we've got to. Get your bunch out of this creek-bed; we'll have to take our chances in the open. I'll look after the kid."

He turned back, produced a knife and slashed the ropes that bound the hurt trooper in saddle. The woman cried out in protest.

"Take my reins," Tilman told her, mounting. He reached across and lifted the trooper in his arms, cradled him there. "Now, lead out after the others."

It was the only way; he couldn't guide his own mount himself, and McGraw and the three troopers had to be free to handle their weapons, if the need rose.

The woman obeyed. They rode close together, now out of the creek-bed, heading southward across land as level as a tabletop, moving figures that must be silhouetted afar against that low-hanging moon.

The boy in Tilman's arms muttered in delirium, voice thready and faint. Occa-

sionally he writhed against the hurt in him, chewing his tongue to keep from crying out. Tilman spoke gently, in compassion, to soothe him. Once the woman looked around. "You're a strange man," she told him.

He grunted inwardly. In a moment of stress such as this, he didn't know what kind of man he was. Like about anybody else, he supposed—what he had to do, he did.

THE miles crawled past. This was a high gamble . . . that they could put distance between themselves and the fire of that big camp, now under the horizon behind them, undiscovered by the scouts that must be picketed around it along a far perimeter.

An eternity passed before the moon set. Sometime after that, in the dark dawn, Tilman broke a long silence. "Stop," he told the woman.

She had been riding with shoulders slumping, now stiffened and looked around. "Why?"

"The boy's dead. Light, please, and help me ease him down."

Tilman hurriedly wrapped the body in his own spare blanket. The woman had made one sobbing sound; she leaned forward to touch the boy's cold face before Tilman covered it with the rough wool. "We can't leave him here!" she cried.

"We have to," Tilman said. "He's beyond any more hurt."

"But it's so—inhuman!"

"It's necessary."

She had left Asa, he remembered, with no remorse.

"Is there time to speak a prayer for him?" she whispered.

"Go ahead—but make it quick," he growled.

She knelt, voice stumbling over something obviously half-forgotten whose simple words he recalled himself. Tilman removed his hat, wondering how many surprises this woman could show him. Then he helped her up, and they started toward their horses.

Two steps only; her hand closed on his arm and she leaned close, breath fanning his cheek. He was acutely aware of the soft pressure of her bosom. "Off to the left—!"

"Yes. I hear him," Wayne Tilman muttered. "It's a lone buck . . . wiggling in like a snake, I think, hoping to pick us off. You go ahead. Ride like blazes, and warn McGraw. No yelling! This fellow may not be alone. I've got to stay here and handle him, do what's necessary to keep word about us from reaching the others—"

"I'm not leaving you alone!" she said fiercely, her grip on his arm tighter.

Then it was too late. The buck, anxious for a coup and glory, gobbled once and came at a fast, weaving rush. The woman tried to put herself between Wayne Tilman and him. Tilman threw her bodily aside and took the Indian's charge.

The stink of sweat and smoke and rancid grease were in his nostrils; foul breath fanned his face. He put out an arm to guard against the knife that he sensed rather than saw, and pain streaked up it as the steel slashed him. The buck yelped exultantly and tried again for the belly slash that would gut him.

They grappled a moment, straining against each other; then Tilman was down, on his back, half-dazed by a jarring fall. He tried to roll, and the knife sliced the crown of his shoulder.

There was a low, breathless, angry cry, the whip of skirts, and the Indian grunted harshly in surprise. The woman was on him, from behind — clawing, Tilman thought, recklessly trying to drag the buck off. He saw the silhouette of her body spin aside and crumple in the dust as the savage violently flailed her. At the same instant, Tilman kicked upward, ruthlessly, and heard a squall of agony.

It was a blow that would have stopped

a white man dead, but there was a ferocious vitality in this one's kind. He came at Wayne Tilman once more, and now Tilman had his Navy Colt unholstered. He shot the buck through the body, then again for good measure. The Indian came down on him; he threw the limp body off and leaped to his feet.

A bitter, threatening scream sounded out in the darkness, then the rattle of a pony's hooves, going at a run northward. This one here had not been alone, then; his companion, instead of pushing the fight, was riding to sound the alarm that a small party of whites was in the *llano*.

A distant yell came from the south. It was Dan McGraw, riding back. The woman had scrambled up. She rushed to Tilman, reaching out. They were very close for a moment. She shivered violently, and he felt her, with an effort of will, steady her nerves. There was a yielding pliancy in her body, a strange kinship born of the danger they had shared.

"You shouldn't have tackled him—but I'm glad you did," he said.

"I was terribly afraid for you," she told him, then cried out as she touched his left arm and felt it jerk in reflexive pain. "You're hurt!"

"Only a scratch. How about yourself?"

"I've some bruises, but they don't matter—"

McGraw arrived, leaping down, speaking with grinding anxiety: "Wayne, are you both all right?"

"There's blood on his arm!" the woman said. "Make a light and I'll tend it!"

"No light!" Tilman snapped. "He got me twice, Dan, arm and shoulder, but I'll do until sunup. I had to shoot him—no other way, and it may have kept the other one from trying for us, too; likely, he wasn't carrying a gun. Also, he may have been ordered to dust back to the main bunch at any sign of whites."

"They'll be along after us, then," McGraw muttered.

"Yes. We'd better pray Coker and the rest of the troop are where he said they'd be."

"I have been praying," the sergeant said grimly. "Ever since Soltau's camp."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Wolf Pack

AS SO often happened in the vastness of this country, McGraw had miscalculated time and distance. It was well past noon before they reached the point on the creek that Captain Coker had designated for rendezvous.

Today's sun blazed down; there was heat shimmer out in the *llano*, distorting things, playing tricks with a man's vision. The whole Comanche nation could be on the move there, Tilman thought, and it would be difficult to spot them.

As far as they could tell, through the slow-crawling hours, nothing moved but themselves in this lonely land. Puzzlement grew in Wayne Tilman. Where were the Comanches and their Kiowa allies? Why did they not attack?

Tilman's left arm was stiff and nearly useless. He had stopped at sunup to rip away his shirt sleeve, cleanse the wound, and had tried to bandage it. The woman had followed him to the creek to take that chore out of his one awkward hand. She had composedly lifted her skirt, revealing slender legs, to rip away a generous portion of her rough cotton petticoat. That was the bandage he wore now.

She had winced at sight of the ugly gash. "This will leave a scar."

"*No importa*—it doesn't mattter," he growled. Then, as she finished, "Thanks."

"*No hay de que*," she murmured, with a shy smile. "*De nada*—it is nothing."

The fluent Spanish words, with an accent that revealed the language was familiar, bothered Wayne Tilman—why, he didn't know.

They came to the place Coker had specified.

The creek deepened here; it ran through a narrow, shallow canyon with shelving walls about fifty feet high. There was the usual scattering of creek timber and brush. And it was empty and silent.

Tilman and McGraw rode slowly into the canyon from the north. Tilman saw the tracks first—the marks of shod horses that had come down from the western side. He pointed them out silently to Dan McGraw, and the sergeant's lips tightened. Those were old tracks.

They followed them. The troop had stopped at about the middle of the canyon; a couple of heaps of charred wood showed where fires had been lighted for the preparation of a meal. But they had not nighted here, so it must have been a noon stop. Then the troopers had gone on—downstream, in a hurry.

"I'd say two days ago, Dan," Tilman said. "I think Coker knew the country was swarming with hostile Indians and decided to get out of here, back to Tiburon."

"Yes," McGraw agreed, and turned to wave his three troopers and the woman on forward. "A tough decision for the captain to have to make. One I'd have made myself; you can't risk a whole troop on the off chance of saving a few men who might be already dead."

Tilman grunted. He didn't think McGraw would have made any such decision. For that matter, it didn't seem to be one that other tough campaigner, Captain Coker, would have made, either. But nothing else could be deduced from those old tracks.

McGraw said, "We'll go after them. With luck, maybe we can catch up."

Wayne Tilman rubbed the black stubble sprouting on his face. Captain Coker on the run toward Fort Tiburon . . . they had no chance at all of catching up with him. All here, men and horses alike, were worn to the breaking point.

HE SPLASHED across the stream for a look on the far side, Colt in hand. There was a crawling feeling in him of being watched, but he found nothing in the brush or among the trees. Presently he came back, to find McGraw dismounted and studying the tracks again.

"Take a look, Wayne," the sergeant said. "There's a couple of hoofprints here that look fresher than the others. What do you make of it?"

Tilman had to agree that two shod horses apparently had gone through here yesterday. "Maybe stragglers. If so, it's a good bet that they've lost their hair by now."

The troopers were gathered about a horse that was down. It lay on the side, panting heavily, eyes filmed. The other mounts stood spraddle-legged, heads lowered.

One of the men turned away, bending at the creek to splash water in his face. He sat down, staring dully at nothing, suddenly slumped forward, asleep. Not as a result of last night alone, but of many other sleepless nights as well since this ill-starred patrol had begun.

The woman stood quietly, arms crossed. More sand in her than in the troopers, Tilman conceded to himself. Her eyes were shadowed and the fatigue she felt must be an even heavier burden for her than it was for them, but she kept her back stiff and refused to give in to it.

"Get that man on his feet," McGraw growled. "Unpack. We'll eat and take a breather. Then we're going on."

The woman suddenly moved, reaching out to touch Tilman's hand.

"Come to the creek," she said. "I'll tend that hurt arm again."

Wayne Tilman moved back along the creek, walking slowly with the feel in him that he was dragging his boots in quicksand, so deep was his weariness. He had made a wary scout to southward.

McGraw had set up a camp of sorts at a narrow place between creek and canyon

wall. It offered some cover of trees and brush and boulders. The sergeant was sitting with back against a rock, watching northward. Two troopers sprawled asleep, near him. The third was across the creek, posted to watch the camp—and probably asleep also, sitting yonder with head down on knees. McGraw had found it impossible to keep them awake—had been forced to the decision that at least three hours' sleep must be allowed them, if time was granted for it.

"See anything?" the sergeant asked.

"I climbed the south bank and saw a lot of dust, but it's blowy out on the *llano*. Maybe that whole party's near, but there's no way to tell."

"Any hostile sign along the creek?"

"No. Queer thing—I've got the feeling we're not alone here, but I'd take an oath there's no Indian in this canyon, Dan. I sighted some broken country nearby to eastward, with deep draws and barrancas. May be some of them there, but if so they're laying mighty low. That, plus the failure of the main party to show, has got me puzzled. There's something mighty strange about it all."

"It could be they're cat-and-mousing us—but there's no profit, ever, in trying to guess what Indians will do, or why," McGraw said. "Guess we'd better start getting ready to leave this place—unless you'd like a short nap, Wayne."

Tilman smiled tightly. "Probably too much sleep due soon for me to be grabbing at it ahead of time, Dan."

"All the sleep there is," McGraw agreed. "No use pretending any different, with you. Two of the horses are dead, and the rest finished. Don't know we'd have a chance even if they were fresh and full of run. Chance or not, though, we're going to make a try at getting away!"

"Yes. We'll try," Tilman said.

The sergeant squinted appraisingly at the sky. "It'll be a little dark in half an hour. I'll get my boys up."

Tilman wondered where the day had gone. Only moments ago, it seemed, they had entered this shallow canyon. Now shadows were long and gray across it, and the sun was nearly down.

But there would be no interlude of deep darkness, this evening. That full moon was already rising. Tonight, its cold, stark radiance would reveal them clearly to the pursuing war party.

Wayne Tilman shook off this kind of thinking. He looked around, and asked, "Where is the woman?"

"Up-creek a bit. She wanted to bathe, with some privacy, and I couldn't see any reason why she shouldn't."

Tilman started to leave. McGraw spoke again, "Wayne . . . time's come to speak of something that'll have to be done. They mustn't take her alive."

Tilman studied him. "I know what's necessary, Dan, and you're well aware of it. Just why are you reminding me of the mercy shot?"

"Because," McGraw said, coming stiffly to his feet, "I mean to do it myself. Bear that in mind."

"I've already told you I had no bullet planned for her!"

"Yes. And I think you meant it. That's why I'm speaking now. You want it any plainer?"

His meaning came slowly to Wayne Tilman, and when it did the muscles ridged tightly along his jaw. To let her be grabbed alive by those devils soon due . . . to take his satisfaction from that . . .

"Damn you, Dan, you're saying I'm inhuman!"

"No, boy. Only that you took Asa's death mighty hard. Me, I don't care what she did, she's not to suffer pain!"

Tilman turned away. He could not trust himself to say more. McGraw's voice reached after him: "One more thing—I told her who you are. Do as you please, but I'd suggest you make your peace with her!"

IT WAS a queer thing; Wayne Tilman's anger at Dan McGraw drained swiftly away, as he moved up-creek. The reason that had driven him from New Mexico into the *llano* semed now remote and relatively unimportant. He was thinking hard about something else—the puzzle again, of why the Indians were delaying so long. It nagged at him that those two shod horses that had been in the canyon yesterday might have something to do with it. But why?

Presently he saw the woman.

She had found a small stand of brush by the water's edge that shielded her from view from the camp. Her hair was damp and her arms and face shiny with moisture; she had removed her blouse and was washing it, evidently preferring to put on the garment again wet to wearing it grimy and blood-stained.

Tilman stopped. There was pale splendor in her bare shoulders. She wore a filmy camisole of some cheap material, much mended, with a faded bit of ribbon worked into the upper hem.

He looked down at his bandaged arm. The cloth strips were of rough cotton, torn from her petticoat.

She became aware of him and looked around, lifting an arm to her bosom. Then she rose slowly to her feet, with a quiet gesture that indicated this moment of revelation did not matter—or anything else, now. When she spoke, her voice was quiet and steady:

"What the sergeant said made plain your feeling toward me. It was wasted. Conscience can deal more punishment than any bullet!"

"Perhaps," Tilman said slowly, many things becoming clear to him.

"It's true!" she said. "There were nightmares, ever since Cruces, and hours of bitter tears! As for Wilmette . . . he was a coward, a man who fired wildly that night, and then ran; he didn't know until later that he had hit your brother. He died a hundred deaths before the Indians killed him at Soltau's camp, because he knew about you, and knew you would follow him. Turning your gun on Wilmette would have been like killing a cringing dog!"

A moment of silence; Tilman heard McGraw speaking to the troopers: "On your feet, lads! We're heading home!"

The woman continued: "You can use your bullet on me. We both know there's no way out for any of us, and that it must be fired anyway—the mercy shot that must be used to keep a woman out of Indians' hands. But use it in mercy, Wayne, not revenge—!"

McGraw called, "Wayne, we're ready to go!"

The woman whispered, "I wanted you to know the truth about what happened at Cruces, and afterwards. The two you were pursuing already had their punishment . . . For me, running away was no good. I found that out when Soltau and his men recognized me for what I was. I shouldn't have tried it a second time—"

He was only abstractedly aware of these words; his head was tilted toward the north, watching sharply, as more things became clear. Now he turned to her, transferring the Spencer to his stiff left hand, right hand reaching out to touch her bare shoulder.

The cool, pale flesh quivered at his touch. She caught her breath, swaying back a little. Then he gripped reassuringly, and she stood steadfast. "There'll be no bullet for you," Tillman said, "and I don't care what it was that made you run!"

"What?" she said. Then, "look behind you—!"

"I know. I saw him a minute ago. He's not alone—and they're moving in from the south, too. We'll go along to the camp, now."

He released her, and swung to face the painted Comanche buck who had appeared up-canyon a hundred yards, just beyond effective rifle range in this uncertain light,

who now sat his pony, waiting, as others came out of the gray canyon haze to join him. They moved with the quiet, gliding sinousness of wolves, massing for the attack.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Trap

TILMAN worked toward the camp, watching both ways. The woman stayed close to him, a hand resting lightly on his hurt arm, seeming to draw strength from the contact. Well, she was giving him strength, too.

The troopers were standing, rifles ready, the tightness of shock in their faces; it came hard for any man to realize that here, inevitably, was the end of all things for him. McGraw gave Tilman a grim look. "A fast rush from both sides—with orders, likely, to grab all of us alive they can for another evening's entertainment."

Tilman nodded agreement. There was no chance for a parley with those devils. History had no record of their relenting when they held the upper hand.

Some light still gilded the sky, but that haze deepened here in the canyon. This was the moment the Comanches and their murderous allies, the Kiowas, favored most for the bloody business that was their way of life. About thirty of them were up-creek, ready and restlessly waiting for something; another bunch milled off to southward.

"Dan, it's still damned queer," Tilman said. "Why are they waiting? Why ride up like that, to sit and watch us? I've never heard of them doing such a thing before; those bucks are all on edge with eagerness to strike. What's holding them back?"

He gnawed at his lip. McGraw said, voice brittle, "Time's past for talk about it. And what I spoke of before must be done now—"

"There's only one answer!" Tilman interrupted. "They think this may be a trap, with us as bait! That explains why they've taken so long to get here—they were scouting carefully as they moved—and why they're hesitating now. They can't pass up a chance at easy coups, but at the same time they're doubtful. Look yonder!"

The bent, wizened figure of an old chief hunched on his pony, had appeared up the creek. He wore a turkey-red blanket about his shoulders and bore a startling resemblance to a purse-mouthed Yankee banker. Tribesmen crowded around him. An animated discussion began.

"Satank!" Dan McGraw breathed.

"And not liking this," Tilman said. "He's got a sharp nose for trouble; the whole set-up screams danger at him. Dan, I understand now those fresh hoof-tracks made yesterday! We *are* bait, and this *is* a trap—!"

"No! The troop returned to Tiburon, and Satank knows it, or he wouldn't even be here!" McGraw said. His face was tight and drawn. He lifted his pistol and thumbed back its hammer, then hesitated.

THE young bucks, eager to attack, were bombarding Satank with pleas. He silenced them with an abrupt, slashing gesture. His gaze lifted to the canyon rims, studying them with hard, tense concentration. Then his arm was plucked and a brave pointed toward the camp. In the deep quiet, the sound of his astonished grunt came clearly.

"He's seen the woman, and he knows she'd never be risked as bait," McGraw said. "Now, time's run out on us."

He turned to her, and continued, "I can give you a moment for a bit of prayer. Kindly turn away. I promise it'll be done quickly, with no pain . . ."

Tilman lunged at McGraw, slammed a shoulder into the sergeant, and bucked him aside. To the woman, he said, "Put your back against that bank!"

She obeyed, and he planted himself in front of her, so close the pressure of her

body was strong against his. Tilman's Spencer lifted to cover the sergeant, pain grinding in his left arm; he ignored it. "Dan, you'll use no bullet on her! There's a long chance for her to live—for all of us—and we're taking it!"

"There isn't!" McGraw said. "And I warned you before—you're not going to put her in their hands!"

"I don't mean to. She isn't Elinor!" Tilman said.

The woman gasped, and McGraw froze. Then the bunch up-creek began to move—slowly, with taunts and brags, a luxury they could indulge in here with what seemed a sure and easy victory waiting. McGraw rubbed his face and turned reluctantly away, to deploy his troopers.

The woman breathed. "How long have you known—about me?"

"Only since I saw you with your blouse off," Tilman answered. "There were plenty of signs pointing to the truth; I stumbled over all of them. Elinor took her fancy, expensive clothes with her—she wouldn't have been wearing what you have on. I saw that, and realized she would never have given her own name, would have jumped at the chance to take yours. Also, she hated Spanish, wouldn't learn a word of the language, while you speak it well."

Her arms circled him for a moment, and he felt the pressure of her cheek against his shoulder. "If I had only met a man like you before it all started!" she whispered.

The bucks were still chanting and making their horses prance, yonder. Then one, worked into a frenzy by the sound of his own voice, sounded the chilling gobble of the Comanche war-cry and came at a headlong charge, lance down, eager to be the first to strike. Tilman said, "He's mine, Dan!" He tracked the brave, letting him come a little closer to be sure, then hammered a bullet that drove him into the dust.

An instant later the troopers added the crash of their single-shot carbines. McGraw's harsh yell cut through the racking echoes: "Pistols now; stand steady and make every shot count—!"

Then it was a hurricane of sound and frenzied motion as the attack came in force, from both up-creek and down, the squealing of mustangs and the drum-rolls of their hooves, the whining hiss of arrows and crash of guns—dust and flying spray and acrid reek of gunpowder. Tilman shot the Spencer empty with the woman clinging to him.

His last bullet disposed of one of them wearing chief's feathers, who had broken into the timber here and was right on top of him when he came down in a slack, hard fall. Tilman dropped the rifle and shifted to his Colt, working it fast, trying to keep track of the shots but losing count. He had an impression of Satank sitting his pony off at a little distance, still searching those canyon rims overhead. There was a milling turmoil of horsemen in the creek; the attack had for a moment gone askew as the two groups of riders came together, and was now being straightened out for the final drive at these stubborn whites.

There was fresh hurt in Wayne Tilman, a hot trickle of blood over his ribs, so he had been hit again. And in him was a feeling of defeat, of his gamble failing.

All of the pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place, and the picture it showed him had to be right. He knew why Satank was scanning those canyon rims; men had been sent to scout them, and there had been no signal to report them free of danger. Tilman told himself another minute might be enough. He had to stay alive that long—he had to keep the woman alive.

Then McGraw was stumbling through dust and swirling smoke toward him, pistol in hand. There was blood on the sergeant, a wild, tearing anxiety in him. The tribesmen were on the move again, coming at this corner where Tilman shielded the woman.

"One bullet left in my gun, and it's got to be used right!" McGraw said. "Stand away from her!"

"Dan, we've got to hang on—and wait—!"

Wayne Tilman was hit again, a bullet from that cloud of horsemen that dropped him to one knee. Satank was shouting something, voice high and thin; it caused the Indians to hesitate, horses plunging in the creek and excitedly fighting their hackamores. The woman knelt beside Tilman, arm about him.

Dan McGraw came on, face like chiseled gray granite. "I'd rather use this on myself, but they're not going to take her alive!"

His gun pointed at the woman, while his eyes mirrored the torment in him. Then he froze. Somewhere the brassy blare of a bugle was sounding.

Many guns crashed from both canyon rims, their flashes like fireflies in the dusk. Satank went past toward the south, bent low and slashing his pony. His braves followed in a pell-mell rush, fleeing this deadly trap that had at last snapped shut. McGraw tried for the chief with his last bullet, and missed. Tilman tried for the chief, also; his Colt's hammer snapped on an empty shell.

Satank, Tilman thought, would probably get free. But he was leaving a lot of his braves here.

HE SAT on a boulder, with stinging hurt in him; a bullet had scored his ribs and a chunk of flesh had been gouged from his right thigh. Paradoxically, he felt very good.

The woman had gone with McGraw to the three troopers. All had taken hits. The quiet murmur of her voice was pleasant in the dusk. It had already, Tilman knew, eased some of the torment in Dan McGraw, the bitter rawhiding of himself for the thing he had almost done.

Troopers appeared in the canyon, on foot, sliding down the canyon walls, cautiously searching among scattered bodies for those who still lived. Then a horseman appeared. It was Captain Coker, a grizzled officer, who spoke to McGraw: "Sergeant, I'd have given my next promotion to have been down here with you! Had to hold my fire until all the bucks Satank sent to watch along those canyon rims could be grabbed; one yip from them and the try would have failed. Didn't like handling it this way, but my orders were to find Satank and end his mischief, and I couldn't bring the old devil to a fight in the open—a trap here had to work, or there would have been hell on the *llano* all summer."

The woman was beside Tilman again. She spoke in a tired whisper. "I couldn't see it mattered to tell you who I really was, there at the creek a while ago—but I wanted you to know how it was with Wilmette and your brother's wife, after they left Cruces. Every night I heard her crying in her wagon, in remorse for what she had done."

Coker spoke again: "I gambled you'd make it here, McGraw, bringing Satank after you—sent most of the horses back toward Tiburon two days ago in simulation of fear and flight, and hid my men in that broken country eastward. Rode to the canyon last night to see if you had arrived, wanted to explain what I was doing and that you were to stay here and tempt Satank into trying for you. My Tonkawa scouts reported today you made it; I decided then it would be better to attempt no contact."

Tilman stood up. He reached for the woman's hand, clasping it gently. "I've a ranch beyond Estancia," he said. "Will you go there with me? We'll stop to see the chaplain at Tiburon—"

"No!" she answered, an anguished sound. "I took that other woman's name because I wanted Alice Grimes buried and forgotten. I hoped to get out of this country—was

(Continued on page 111)

Two Girl Man

By

Zeta Rothschild

BANDITS had as much attraction for the young women of the eighties as film stars have to-day. But our grandmothers had one advantage. Given an opportunity to meet the heroes—and most people who weren't their victims had a soft spot for them—their company was welcomed by the bandits. The girls rode off with them, fought by their side, did their best to help them escape from jail, and stood by until death did part them. With few exceptions.

Harry Tracy credited with killing fifteen men and the objective of one of the longest and most strenuous manhunts staged in the far west, had both types of women in his short career as a bandit. One, Genie Carter, left home when she was fifteen to follow him. Later she died in his arms, shot by his pursuers.

Harry Tracy started his criminal career at the age of sixteen when he held up the local postoffice. Pretty blonde Genie Carter, even younger, had been a schoolgirl friend. No one suspected the two young people were in love. But when Tracy fled town, the sheriff at his heels, Genie rode out with him. They said good-bye on the outskirts of town with Tracy promising to send for her and Genie in turn promising to come to him whenever he sent her word.

Word came back of more shootings, including a sheriff or two, before a letter came for Genie asking her to meet Tracy at Cripple Creek. Genie secretly left her home and arrived at Cripple Creek where the two registered as Mr and Mrs. Ward.

There was competition among bandits in that era. And one made a slighting remark about Genie loud enough for her to hear as she passed by. Genie, no weakling, turned round quickly, walked back to the man, and slapped his face so that the smack could be heard across the street. That should have been enough. But the next day Tracy shot the man through the heart.

Tracy was held for murder but protested he shot in behalf of his wife, a plea that was always good in that day. But his rival had friends powerful enough to influence the sheriff to hold him, and Tracy went to jail.

Two weeks later Genie came to the jail to see him. And the sheriff obligingly put a chair close to the bars of Tracy's cell, and they talked in whispers. Somehow Genie managed to slip a six-shooter to Tracy. Then with her own gun, she forced the sheriff to open the cell door, and together they fled on two horses waiting outside.

Soon they sold the horses and continued their flight by stagecoach, wagon, and train. Now Genie was an active partner in Tracy's bandit life.

Two bandits held up a mule train. The older bandit hoisted several bags of gold dust valued at $10,000 to his horse while the youthful bandit—Genie wore men's clothing—cut the mule traces, tied up the driver and, on order from Tracy, took a mine payroll from a messenger. Then Tracy and Genie rode off, separated, and agreed to meet in five days at a hotel in Denver.

But Tracy never kept that date. He was spotted in Provo, arrested, and sentenced to ten years in the Utah penitentiary. Genie in the meantime, opened a millinery shop in Denver and bided her time to find the right man to help her arrange for Tracy's escape.

One day a note was dropped at Tracy's feet—it was from Genie who wrote that on the following Thursday, she would come to see him. She came, dressed in widow's garb, and said she was Tracy's sister and had just heard of his arrest. Four guards were on hand to watch and listen. And they heard the "sister" upbraid Tracy for disgracing the family.

The next move was made by an attorney engaged by Genie who got an order for Tracy to be taken to Provo to serve as a witness in another case.

Tracy, handcuffed and in irons, under heavy guard sat in one coach wondering what was going to happen when he noticed a pretty young woman, a man trailing her, passing his seat. The young woman was Genie. No sign of recognition, however, passed between her and Tracy. It was a move only to show that she was on the job and something was about to happen.

Genie sat silently in a seat ahead of Tracy until the train was running through a wild part of the country. Suddenly Genie got up from her seat, came back toward Tracy and his guards, a gun in her hands. In a few moments the sheriff had taken off the handcuffs and irons from Tracy. And Genie's companion had fixed them on the sheriff and guard. When the train stopped at a junction, Genie and her friend stepped off and Tracy, on the rear platform, jumped off just as the train started.

Horses were waiting. And, though Genie and Tracy separated, they agreed to meet at Carson City, Nevada. Here they registered at the hotel as man and wife.

Here Genie made her position clear. She wanted to turn respectable. But Tracy began gambling. They separated. Again they made up in Spokane. And now Tracy finally agreed to settle down. They bought a small ranch in Idaho.

But Tracy had not entirely reformed. Stolen horses were seen at his ranch. The Vigilantes warned him. But another batch of stolen horses was brought to him. Warned the Vigilantes meant business, Genie begged Tracy to flee with her. Finally a wagon was loaded, and two of the horse thieves rounded up the horses for a flight.

It was too late. Before they could get off, the Vigilantes were there. The shooting began. Genie was hit, and Tracy came back to pick her up and started down the ravine, the girl in his arms, for a hidden camp. That same night Genie died. And Tracy buried her himself.

FOR several years Tracy was at the head of gangs though sometimes he worked alone. He was captured in Utah but broke out of jail in two weeks with the help of a wooden gun he had whittled and covered with silver foil. Then he headed for Portland, Oregon.

In a saloon there he met Dan Merril who took him to his home. Here he met Dan's sister, Mollie and shortly afterwards married her. Mollie had no objection to banditry, and her brother and Tracy staged a series of successful hold-ups. They lived high until some stolen jewelry which they had pawned was traced back to them.

Dan Merril was taken into custody in his home, but Tracy got away. If he would deliver Tracy to the authorities, he would get off, Merril was told. Both his mother and sister begged him to hand over Tracy. And at last Merril got word to Tracy to meet him, and, when Tracy arrived, there was the sheriff and his posse.

Tracy saw them in time. He and Merril got to the railroad station just as a train was pulling out and jumped aboard. But the conductor pulled the emergency cord, the train stopped, and the sheriff and his

posse caught up with the train and arrested both men.

Tracy got word to Mollie and asked her to help him escape. (It hadn't been necessary to send word to Genie—she had come of her own accord to help him.) The answer came promptly through a fellow prisoner who had contact with the outside world. Mollie sent word she was through and never wanted to see him again.

But the fellow prisoner in for petty thefts was soon released, and he managed to get guns, ammunition, and ladder to Tracy.

On June 9th, 1902, Tracy and Merril scaled the walls of the Oregon Penitentiary, killed three guards on the way, and made their escape.

Tracy and Merril headed for Portland. The Governor of Oregon ordered out two hundred and fifty militia men to join the posse. The two men wandered criss-cross through the country, stopping at roadhouses and farms, getting a free meal and then robbing their hosts.

Then they had camped for some time in a woods. But with the posse on their trail they had to keep moving. The next time Tracy was spotted, he was alone. Merril was never seen again.

The first week in August Tracy was seen near a ranch two hundred miles from Spokane with the posse close on his heels.

As the men closed in on him Tracy hid behind a hay stack. But one leg was exposed. And a bullet smashed it.

Tracy again got away. But that night the men caught up with him. But as they approached, Tracy put the muzzle of his gun in his mouth and fired.

Mollie Merril made no bones at her relief that her husband had been killed. She had gone into hiding when she learned of his escape from prison. And not until she was assured of his death, did she come out and return to her home.

Genie and Mollie—the two women in Harry Tracy's life—one died in his arms, the other celebrated his death. ★ ★ ★

According to stern range code, any man who knew how to so much as fry an egg or boil a pot of coffee could be impressed into service as a substitute cook until trail's end.

A man thus impressed had only one advantage over a regular cook. He was supposed to be immune to criticism. A codicil to the code stated that anyone who complained about the food could be made to replace the replacement and become the chuck-wagon man himself.

They tell of one drafted skillet-slinger who was bound and determined to pass the chore on to someone else. Just one adverse comment, he reasoned, and he would be free of the hated assignment. . . .

Stonily, the cowboys ate what he gave them. But at last human nature took its toll. A victim yielded, prompted by a really unusual display of genius at ruining sourdough. The poor man had to exclaim violently after one bite, "Salty as hell! Burnt on the bottom, raw in the middle, tough as old leather . . ."

Then he saw the cook beam at him, and with desperate resourcefulness, concluded in a hurry, "Shucks! But that's just the way I like 'em best!" ★ ★ ★

STAR'S PIN-UP GIRL-OF-THE-MONTH

Could this bewitching, vibrant beauty, who had known the kisses of so many men, make her magic work on the man she wanted most?

Turn to next page.

Tumbleweed Darling

By Cliff Farrell

Had Jay Tallant sunk too low to fight for—and win—the beautiful wildcat who saved his life?

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Bessie was struggling desperately in the arms of a cowboy.

MOANING down from the snow-bound peaks to the west, the raw wind prowled like an unleashed beast of prey across the high sage plain. Range cattle took cover in the coulees and breaks along the frozen Thundercloud River, or drifted away before the oncoming blizzard.

The bitter wind, sent small whirlpools of gritty snow dancing madly across the rustling sage, and drowned out the noise of the rusty locomotive and its score of empty freight and stock cars. The engine puffed to a stop at the Antelope Springs water tank out in the open plain.

Two burly brakemen, eyes red and smarting in the cold, came running up from the caboose, and jerked open the door of a

box car. One had a bulldog-nosed gun in his hand, and the other was armed with a hickory brake-stick.

"Come outa there, bo," one bawled. "Hit the grit! End o' the line for you."

The lone occupant of the empty car unrolled from a dusty old soogan. He looked at the gun in the brakie's mittened fist, and a little scornful quirk appeared on his square, stubble-covered face.

"We been watchin' yuh ever since yuh swung on at Bowie Junction," one of the shacks growled. Then he invited, "Try boardin' us ag'in, if yuh want your skull cracked."

The sandy-haired drifter shrugged. He alighted on the frozen gravel, turning up the collar of his frayed old mackinaw.

The shacks glared at him, then returned to the caboose where the stove glowed cherry red. They kept an eye on the lonely figure out there by the ice-fringed water tank.

"Cowboy by his looks," one remarked. "That's why I put him off the drag. I ain't forgot that bunch of cowpokes that throwed you an' me off our own train a couple weeks ago, Ed."

"Nor me," the other shack spat. "I was hopin' this one would put up a fight. I'd enjoy bendin' a brake-club over the head of one of them damn high-heeled sons. I hate the breed. He wasn't with that outfit that hoorawed us, but they're all alike. They deal misery tuh railroad men."

"Fer a minute I had a hunch he was goin' tuh hackle an' bite back," the other shrugged. "Did yuh notice his eyes? Gray an' cold as that sky up there. Sorta give me a queer kind of a chill."

"His eyes will be a damned sight colder an' grayer before long," the other scoffed. "That's a blizzard sky. Inside another hour that drifter is goin' tuh wish he had never been born."

"He'll wait at the tank for another train," the other chuckled grimly. "He don't know that there ain't no more on this jerk-line until mornin'. By that time I reckon he won't be no more'n an icicle."

THE WIND knifed through Jay Tallant's thin, old mackinaw. He moved to the lee of the water tank and watched the train pull out.

He saw the faces of the brakemen against the frosted windows of the caboose, grinning jeeringly. The freckled, stubby fingers of the red-whiskered derelict slid impetuously to the six-shooter that was holstered beneath the skirt of his mackinaw. Then he shrugged and released the gun, ramming his chilled hands deep in his pockets again.

"No more," he muttered harshly. "No more killin! Never again!"

The habitual look of fixed indifference settled again on the blunt, rugged features beneath the film of red beard. His attitude was lax and remote even as he grew aware of the increasing drive of the wind.

Range-born, weather-wise, this drifter knew well that a blizzard was coming. He looked around, wondering just where he was. He had boarded this freight at Bowie Junction on the main line about daybreak, expecting to awaken somewhere near Julesburg in Colorado by dusk.

He was heading south. To Texas maybe, perhaps to Mexico, or even South America. It didn't matter to him how far he went or where he stopped. Only that he kept moving on, ever on to some unknown destination.

He wondered how soon another train would come along. Then he frowned. This track was only a single line, hastily laid and still unballasted. It had the earmarks of some new branch line.

A sudden premonition caused him to turn and sharply scan the mountains to the west. The range rose abruptly some ten miles away. It seemed nearer at hand in the brittle air, beneath the menacing, colorless sky, the sawtooth rim lifting sharply against the ominous yellowish haze

that was breaking in from the north. And Tallant suddenly laughed softly, mirthlessly.

Better than any spot on earth, he knew those mountains. There was old Eagle Nest Peak, with its circular top, and below that was the purple slash that marked Crying Squaw Canyon.

The whole range leaped up around him now in bitter familiarity. He was home! Ha laughed again, and the sound was as bleak as the whine of the rising wind.

Then ghosts of the past came up and rode the wind around Jay Tallant as he stood there, driving even that cheerless laughter from his lips, and bringing an emotion into his throat that he had believed was forever dead. He cursed himself for weak sentimentality, and he cursed the destiny that had caused him to board a freight bound a hundred miles off his route southward.

But something kept welling up in his throat even though he tried to forget the long-ago vision of a reckless, red-haired kid in cowboots and oversize chaps, riding with the roundup crew right here at Antelope Springs. And with it came the mental image of a blue-eyed, freckled girl with bare legs and rust-colored hair who tried to dress and talk like a boy. That kid was himself as he had been only ten years ago, and the girl was his twin sister, Jane Tallant. These sage flats on which he stood shivering were part of his father's ranch.

The railroad was new. That was the only change in the landscape in more than ten years. But Jay Tallant had changed.

He saw cattle stringing into a coulee, and he made out the Tumbling T brand. Jay Tallant had heeled and rustled many a calf up to the branding fire to take that famous cattle brand.

He pictured the solid old ranch house in the lee of Lobo Butte a dozen miles to the north, offering its sanctuary and hospitality to everyone, as it had always done for the past forty years. It was the house in which he and Jane had been born ten minutes apart, and where their mother died that the infant twins might come into the world.

Past that rugged house, the last of the great buffalo herds had drifted in years gone by, and against its thick walls more than one Sioux war party had vainly shattered their lances. As a toddling child there Jay Tallant had clung to the knee of old Jim Bridger, the trail-blazer, and had heard him talk of Kit Carson. The yellow-haired Custer had paused there at Tumbling T ranch for a meal before marching into that shambles on the Little Bighorn.

Teddy Roosevelt had been a welcome guest. And from that house Jay's father, Fremont Tallant, had gone to serve two terms in the United States Senate.

Jay Tallant thought of the ruddy glow from the great fireplace that would be playing through the windows of the living room as a beacon to riders seeking refuge from the oncoming blizzard. That house was open to all men, except to Jay Tallant, son of its owner. For Jay knew that there his name had not been mentioned for ten years. . . .

He forced these gibbering ghosts into the dark corners of his mind. Eagle Nest Peak was dissolving into the saffron-tinged mist and the high plain lay bleakly forlorn. The wind began to take on an eerie, twanging sound. Scudding snow, like robes of ghouls, raced across the flats.

The old Tumbling T bog camp in the river flats, some four or five miles directly west, would be deserted in winter. Jay wrapped the soogan around his shoulders and moved out to face the full drive of the rising blizzard.

But when he had traveled a mile Jay Tallant knew that the odds were banked high against his ever reaching the bog camp. He rested briefly in the lee of a cut-bank where half a dozen cattle huddled and bawled dismally. In the spring, riders would find their bones at that spot. And

they would also likely find his own whitening skeleton when the snow banks began to dwindle.

They would wonder who he had been, and would likely bury him in the corner of the ranch graveyard reserved for nameless men. Perhaps his own father would read the Lord's Prayer over his grave, and Jane would stand there looking down, and pondering the mystery of this drifter's past.

But Jay Tallant was not waiting there to die standing still like the cattle. When the numbness began to make itself apparent in his legs, he pushed on, into the storm.

CHAPTER TWO

Out of the Storm

THE blizzard-lashed day was dying early, and all landmarks were blotted out in the roaring blast of snow. Jay drove doggedly on without rest now, knowing that to stop again was death.

He set his course by the push of the wind, quartering into it, and praying that it had not veered from the north. Now and then he flounced into snow-choked coulees, and the struggle to emerge again and fight on, drained his vitality to the dregs.

Darkness was near, and the end of life was near for Jay Tallant when he staggered into the lee of a high red shale bluff. He recognized it as Red Bluff. It overlooked the aspen flats of Thundercloud River. The bog shack lay in its lee not far ahead. He could not miss the shack if he followed the base of the bluff.

Racing the thickening twilight, he floundered through drifted snow. Blindly he came against barbed wire. That brought a twinge of doubt to his numbed mind. There had been no wire at this point that he ever remembered. But he had been away ten years.

From somewhere came the bawling of cattle and he knew that they were piling up against the wire. That would be more work for the bone pickers in spring. A hell of a place for a fence! Someone should be out here, cutting the wire to let them drift on into the cedar breaks up the river.

Jay tried to pull the wire down, but gave it up as hopeless. He climbed the fence and struggled on. At last he paused. He was approaching the aspen thickets, facing the full drive of the storm. He had missed the bog camp, or, more likely, it was no longer there.

The blizzard sought to have its way with him now. Slowly Jay Tallant began to drift with the storm. It was carrying him back to that fence against which the bewildered cattle were massing. Full darkness had come. Jay was beginning to flounder on. Twice he fell down and had to exert all his energies to struggle up again. Then he stopped. Instinct alone told him that that it was a horse and rider that loomed up suddenly ahead.

He heard the thin twang of parting wire above the drone of the wind, and knew that he had come upon some cowhand who was cutting the fence to give the cattle a chance. The rider came nearer and he clawed at a stirrup to attract attention. He heard a voice, and it brought a dull twinge of surprise. This rider, who had risked death to help the cattle, was a woman!

She flung down, supporting him with supple arms. "I'll help you into the saddle," she shouted above the roar of the wind.

Jay Tallant resented the fact that it was a woman who had saved him. Somehow he resented being saved at all. Death here in the blizzard would have solved a lot of problems for him.

She rode behind him, steadying him with sturdy strength. She forded the horse into the teeth of the blizzard, and seemed to know her way. A deadly drowsiness was stealing upon Jay when a lamp, set in a window as a beacon, loomed suddenly through the blinding wall of snow.

The horse halted in a storm shed, and

the girl helped him from the saddle, assisting his numb progress to the door of a lodge-pole cabin.

Near the door she lifted her voice in a hail. "Buck!"

She opened the latch, and helped him in, placing him on a bunk. Hurriedly, she added fresh fuel to the rock fireplace where a bed of red embers glowed.

She threw off her long wolfskin coat and hood, tossed frozen fur gauntlets to a shelf over the stove. She wore a heavy, dark, divided shirt of homespun, and a thick knitted red sweater.

She stripped off Jay's boots and mackinaw. "Face and hands pinched," she muttered. "And feet too."

The warmth of the cabin drove lethargy through Jay. She was only a vague, wavery figure moving about him. But soon the snow she rubbed on his frozen skin began to burn like fire, arousing him.

SHE WAS younger than he had supposed—hardly more than twenty-one, he judged, with finely spun ash-blonde hair, twisted into a practical knot at the back of her head, and big, frank eyes, almost violet in their depths. Perhaps not a beautiful face, with its resolute little chin, shadowed cheeks beneath full cheekbones, and a straight, small nose over a frank mouth; but it was a face that soothed a weary man.

Jay became aware that she was always listening to the tumult of the blizzard as though seeking out some other sound. The gale battered the cabin, dealing solid blows. Eerie voices rode the night, at times sounding like the moans of human beings.

Once she leaped eagerly to the door, standing there braced against the wind. And again she lifted her voice into a frantic scream into the storm. "Buck!"

Only the storm replied. She forced the door shut with a despairing gesture, and returned to Jay.

He motioned her away. "I'm all right now," he declared.

She turned away, and he wondered at the aloof hostility of her manner.

"You're a Tumbling T rider, I imagine?" she asked curtly.

Jay studied her a moment. "No. I was put off a freight train at the water tank out in the flats. I was hunting cover from the blizzard when you found me."

She thought that over, studying him. Subtly her manner changed. She thawed a little toward him.

"I'll rustle some grub and coffee," she said.

Then again she stood silently a moment, tilting her shapely head as she scanned the howling uproar outside for the voice she hoped to hear.

"Your husband, ma'am?" Jay asked. "Is he out there?"

"Not my husband," she said, with a nervous little laugh, "but my brother, Buck Sevier. He went to Big Lodge this morning, about fifteen miles north. He was to be home by dark. I'm Bessie Sevier."

"He's likely holed up somewhere," Jay tried to reassure her. "At some ranch, no doubt."

"There's no ranch except Fremont Tallant's Tumbling T along the way," she said bitterly. "Buck would never go there." Then she hurried into the kitchen.

Jay was thoughtful as he watched her move about the stove. He wondered by what right this girl and her brother ran cattle in the Thundercloud flats. This river range had always been his father's best summer grazing.

"Squatters," Jay thought, and shrugged.

He watched the look of uneasiness increase to fear in her softly tanned face. And then he too began to listen, searching through the howl of the storm for some hopeful sound. But he could hear nothing beyond the wild song of the wind.

At last he pulled on his boots. "I'd be pleased to make a search for him if you'd loan me a horse, ma'am," he offered.

She came into the room, shaking her head

despairingly. "That's hopeless, and you know it. I'd hunt for Buck myself if I thought there was a chance. You're a stranger here, and you'd only get lost."

"I've been in this range before," Jay remarked casually as he headed for the door. "I know the trail to Big Lodge."

Determinedly, she barred the way. "You're in no shape to buck the blizzard. You're about tuckered. You look like—well, like you haven't been eating regularly." She saw the unchanged purpose in his face.

"It isn't entirely the blizzard that worries me," she added hastily. "A blizzard wouldn't stop a man like Buck. But I didn't want him to go to town at all today. We're in trouble."

There was a sound at the door. Jay wheeled and opened it. The wind thrust a snow-plastered man into the room. Jay caught him as he began to slump to the floor.

"Buck!" Bessie Sevier screamed.

Jay saw the dark stain of frozen blood on the sheep-lined windbreaker.

"He's been shot," the girl gasped. "Oh, I was afraid of it. I knew something like this was coming. Fremont Tallant! That awful, selfish old man. He shot Buck!"

Jay lifted the dazed man to the bunk. "Shot in the arm," he announced tersely. "Might not be so bad. It's the cold and the storm that's done him in, maybe."

The girl steadied instantly and ran to help. Silently they worked on her brother. Removing his coat and shirt they saw a bullet slash through the muscles of his right upper arm. It had stopped bleeding.

"Nothing to wory about," Jay remarked. "Hardly more'n a scratch. Hand me that brandy bottle."

BUCK SEVIER began to revive as they cleansed and bound his wound, and treated his frost-bitten face. He was a lanky, weather browned cowboy, only two or three years older than the girl, Jay Tallant decided. He liked the square, aggressive cut of Buck Sevier's jaws. He moved back when Sevier's eyes began to open.

"Bess," the brother mumbled, they damned near got me."

"Oh, Buck!" she sobbed. "How did it happen?"

"It was Beaver Watts, that Tumblin' T puncher I kicked off the ranch last week," he muttered. "He laid for me on the trail, five miles out of town. Notched on me with a rifle. The horse saw him, an' shied as he fired, so he just pinked me on the arm. I fell off, an' slung a couple slugs at him as he piled his horse back in the cedars. Couldn't tell whether I hit him."

The girl was silent for a moment. "Buck," she finally murmured huskily. "It's a hopeless fight. We might as well admit we're licked."

Her brother lifted his head angrily. "Not by a damned sight!" he gritted. "I never thought you'd ever say that Bess. You don't really mean you want to cave in now—after all we've gone through?"

"They'll kill you, Buck!" she breathed hopelessly. "It isn't worth it. Let Fremont Tallant have this grass, if that's all he covets. We can start somewhere else."

"I'll never knuckle to that frozen-eyed, selfish old wolf. I went to him like a white man again today, offered to sell for just what we had paid. He eyed me as he would a yellow cur. Said he never compromised with squatters. Damn his narrow-minded, stubborn soul—he ain't human. He's nothin' but a machine—a money-making machine.

Buck Sevier sat up, and now for the first time he discovered Jay standing by the fireplace.

"It's all right, Buck," the girl explained hastily. "He's only a stranger. I found him wandering on foot in the blizzard. I was out cutting that old fence around the bog hole. The stock was beginning to pile up against it."

Buck Sevier came shakily to his feet, eyeing Jay with suspicion. "Maybe he's all right, an' maybe he ain't," he growled. "What's your name, fella?"

"Names don't mean much," Jay said stonily. "I landed in this range by accident. Hopped the wrong train. Your sister saved my life. It wasn't worth much, but she showed sand in riding that storm to save cattle and other drifters like me, so I'll remember it."

"Yeah," Buck Sevier grated with sarcasm. "An' maybe you was sent by Fremont Tallant to poison some more feed stacks or cut our line fences so his Tumblin' T critters could graze us off."

His sister pushed him back. "Take it easy, Buck," she advised. "You're beginning to look upon everyone as an enemy. Not that I blame you much. But this man seems to be telling the truth. Look at him. He looks like a—a—"

She hesitated, confused. "Like a bum!" Jay grated. "Is that the word you're trying to think of?"

The brother and sister glanced at each other, wondering at the cynical bitterness of Jay's tone. Buck Sevier's grimness faded a trifle.

"Maybe I was a little hasty, stranger," Buck conceded. "Come to think of it, you don't exactly carry the Tumblin' T earmark. It's my guess you could stand a couple of square meals, an' a day or two by a warm stove."

"Yeah," Jay remarked. "I don't believe a man like Fremont Tallant would have anything to do with a tumbleweeder like me."

Buck eyed him closely. "You know Tallant?" he asked.

"I know of him," Jay remarked indifferently. "I've heard he owns this range, the grass, the banks—an' the people."

"He doesn't own us!" Bessie Sevier flashed. "And he never will."

"It's always open season on squatters," Jay said coldly."

Her temper flared. "I'll have you know we're not squatters," she said sharply. "We own this land—paid cash for it. It wasn't until we brought in our little herd that we realized the man who sold it to us was a title shark. He had found an error in the old survey. These flats still belonged to the government. The title shark bought it, sold it to us. We tried to do the right thing, in offering to sell to Fremont Tallant for just what we had paid. He refused to buy, called us thieves and squatters. He's determined to drive us out, ruin us!"

Her pretty eyes blazed. "He's made outcasts of us. Nobody dares to be friendly with us, for fear Fremont Tallant will resent it. Every time Buck goes to town he has trouble with some of Tallant's cowboys."

"I'm apologizing," Jay said. "I didn't really think folks like you were squatters."

Bessie Sevier had planned other things to say, but the manner of this ragged drifter disconcerted and nettled her. "I need no apology from you," she snapped. "And I don't know why I bothered to explain this to a man like you, anyway."

She flounced into the kitchen. Buck Sevier grinned a little, and winced as his shoulder gave a stab of pain. "You riled her, drifter. She's got a temper. Don't prod her too much or she'll bend a poker over your head."

Then Sevier's thoughts wandered grimly. "It's a good range to steer clear of, drifter," he muttered. "I wish Bessie was out of it. But I can't talk her into leaving without me, an' I'm damned if I'll cave in to Fremont Tallant. If it's hot lead they want from now on, I'm ready to give 'em a bellyful."

He paused moodily. "As long as I last," he added.

Jay said nothing. He went out and took care of the two unsaddled horses in the shed, fighting his way against the blinding blizzard. When he returned, Bessie Sevier had steaming coffee and beef stew on the table.

IT WAS a silent meal. Her pointed coldness toward him seemed to glance harmlessly from Jay. Inwardly his soul withered. He hated himself, hated his ragged, dusty garb, his seedy, whiskered shagginess. For the first time he realized how far down the scale he had allowed himself to slide. He wondered if it was too late to come back.

Then he sneered inwardly at such thoughts. What the hell did he care what the world thought of him? He remembered those red days and nights in the boom camps down on the Arizona border, when he had worn a law badge, when tough killers and gunmen had stepped aside for him.

Solid citizens had truckled to him then, slapped him on the back and vied for the privilege of buying drinks for him. That was when he was cleaning up a town, making it safe for lesser men.

And afterwards, he recollected, these same substantial men began avoiding him on the street, and respectable women brushed their skirts aside at his passage, and children were influenced to run and hide at his coming. He'd been hailed as a town-tamer at first, and a hero. But after the fighting was done, he'd been branded gunman, killer—a blood-smeared freak. . . .

The girl arranged a bed on a cot in the kitchen for Jay. She occupied a little lean-to off the living room. The blizzard lashed at the cabin, and Bessie Sevier dozed fitfully in her bed. Once she screamed out from the depths of a nightmare. Her brother tossed in the living room bunk, rising often to pace the floor and ease the pain of his throbbing arm.

In the kitchen Jay Tallant lay sleepless, racked by black remorse, and futile, searing memories. He recalled the bitter, winter night, ten years in the past, when a wounded fugitive with a posse on his trail, had come to the Tumbling T ranch for help.

Jay had listened at the keyhole of the living room door. The outlaw was sinewy and red-haired. He was the brother of Jay's dead mother—Jay's blood uncle.

Fremont Tallant, campaigning for election to the United States Senate, had stood there, cold and relentless. "I can't help you, Jay Wheeler," Jay's thin-lipped father had said. "Men like you deserve no help. You're a Wheeler, and all of you have a wild streak that will lead you to a bad end. My own son was named for you. I only hope that none of your wild blood will ever appear in him. Sometimes, for that reason, I've always regretted that I have a son."

Something cold had entered Jay's soul then. It had never melted. When Jay Wheeler staggered from the house after the fruitless interview with his brother-in-law, young Jay Tallant was waiting for him in the shadows with two big, fresh horses.

Jay remembered that freezing night, and how cold and distant the stars had been as he rode away with a wounded outlaw. And the relentless pursuit by a posse, that drove them deeper and deeper until they reached the outlaw stronghold in Jackson's Hole. There his uncle had died of his wound. But young Jay Tallant had gone on, following the gun-trails, sometimes as a long-rider, sometimes as a fighting free-lance badge-toter.

Jay thought of his twin sister, Jane, and ached to see her again. Jane had been high-spirited and sensitive. He wondered if her spirit had been crushed by the ramrod discipline that Fremont Tallant demanded of everyone with whom he dealt.

Now the same Fremont Tallant was trying to crush the spirit of Bessie Sevier and her brother in the same way. He could hear Bessie murmuring in her sleep.

CHAPTER THREE

Feud Range

TOWARD morning the blizzard quieted to a steady, driving wind that whipped up a scudding snow and sent it rattling against the cabin window panes.

"It'll blow out before noon," Buck Sevier remarked as they sat down to the breakfast Bessie had ready. "It's quittin' sooner then I expected. We don't lose any stock in this one."

"I'll be moving on," Jay announced as the meal was finished. "I'm thankin' you, an' hope some day I can square the—"

The muffled rumble of hoofs in the snow beat suddenly upon the house. Jay, through a frosted window pane, saw the blurred figures of riders leap from saddles at the front.

He stepped out of sight in the kitchen an instant before the front door was flung open and a crew of armed men tramped inside.

Buck Sevier uttered a growl of rage, and strode into the living room, headed for the wall where his .45 hung. But a harsh voice halted him.

"Stand still, Sevier!"

Bessie Sevier, ashen-faced ran into the bigger room. "What are you going to do?" she demanded. "Stay away from my brother! He's wounded!"

Jay knew by the ring of spurs that four or five riders had entered.

"One of the boys come ridin' into the ranch with a bullet in his back last night," a man growled in answer. "It was Beaver Watts, a cowboy who had trouble with yore brother last week. Beaver cashed in five minutes after he fell off in front of the bunkhouse. He told us who couleed him as he was ridin' fence along the town trail yesterday. Buck Sevier murdered him."

"He didn't," the girl breathed. "Beaver Watts lied. He shot at Buck from ambush. I know what you plan to do. You mean to hang Buck. Fremont Tallant sees his chance to get rid of my brother. Well, you're not going to take him. I'll—"

Jay heard her race toward the gun rack.

"Grab her!" someone shouted.

Boots thudded, and Buck Sevier cursed. A struggle was going on in the living room.

Jay's gunbelt was draped over a chair. He plucked the six-shooter from the holster and stepped into the doorway. Bessie was struggling desperately in the arms of a cowboy who wore a canvas windbreaker. Two more riders had leaped on her brother, driving him back against the wall where he fought them, the veins bugging in his temples.

Jay stepped into the room, swung the gun muzzle on the head of the cowboy who held the girl. The puncher reeled back with a groan, and went to his knees, dazed.

Jay stepped back, his muzzle swinging and covering the other four. "Get away from Sevier," he ordered. "And stand as you are. I'll blast the first man who turns to swing a gun in this direction.

They were turned away from him. They twisted their heads and stared over their shoulders at him. The hands of the two men fell away from Buck Sevier.

"Who are you?" one of them blurted out.

"Just a tumbleweed," Jay remarked. "Start moving for the door."

He could see them shifting their weights, edging their boots into position to leap. They were sinewy, reckless men with plenty of nerve and savvy. They appraised their lone opponent, and Jay saw their scorn rise.

"Yuh had better tumble on, amigo," a Texan drawled. "You're protectin' a skeankin' dry-gulcher who was accused of murder by a dyin' man."

"Dying men can lie as can the living," Jay stated. "I was here last night when Sevier came in with that wounded arm. It's my belief that this Beaver Watts slung the first bullet."

"Not knowin' who yuh are, yore word don't swing any weight with us," the Texan sneered. "We're four to one. You might down one of us, maybe two. But we'll get you. Pull in yore horns, or give us any name you want sent back to yore folks."

Jay smiled icily. "The name," he said softly, "is Tallant—Jay Tallant. Now turn your wolf loose, boys."

The creeping shift of their bodies ended. Bessie Sevier drew a sharp breath, and her brother's shocked eyes leaped to Jay. Silence held in that room through which the wind swirled a film of snow from the open door.

THE FACES of the four riders were ludicrous playgrounds of shifting thoughts. They watched the eyes of this ragged man there in the door, and did not move.

Bessie Sevier and her brother felt themselves suddenly removed from all this, looking on like spectators. They saw the reckless assurance of the Tumbling T riders ebb away. Something like a shadow of fear crossed their faces. A man moved dry lips and broke the silence.

"Tallant?" he echoed. "Then yo're the old man's—"

"The name," came the brittle response. "Is Jay Tallant. Call your play now, or head for the door. And don't look back."

They glanced at each other uncertainly, and eyed Jay again. "What are you doin' here with these—" one began.

"Rattle your hocks," Jay snapped. "An' take this one with the broken head along."

The Texan shrugged. "He's Jay Tallant, boys," he admitted hoarsely. "I seen him in Douglas five years ago. Didn't recognize him at first. He's changed some. I reckon we better let it ride awhile."

They moved through the door, helping the stunned cowboy. Jay followed them to the outer step.

Gusty wind was driving a blinding wall of snow high in the air. The galloping forms of two riders emerged from the spume, and threw back their horses a rope's length away.

One was a spare-bodied, square-jawed man of fifty, with a trimmed, iron-gray mustache. His eyes were as bright and hard as polished steel beneath straight graying brows. He wore a heavy bearskin coat. His companion was a salty-looking old cowboy.

Jay Tallant's lips tightened. Fremont Tallant was looking at his five cowboys. "What happened?" he demanded curtly. "Did you find Sevier?"

They did not answer. Their eyes turned to the house, and Fremont Tallant twisted in the saddle. Slowly he seemed to freeze and grow still harder as he saw Jay.

"You!" he muttered.

"So you recognized me, even as a drifter," Jay remarked tonelessly.

Fremont Tallant's face was gray and bleak. "To my sorow," he said in a brittle voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Preventing the lynching of an innocent man."

Fremont Tallant glanced at his men, and understood. His shoulders lost some of their aggressive pride. "So, you've come here to oppose me, too," he muttered. "It wasn't enough that outlaws, rustlers and range thieves try to swarm over me, but my own s—"

He refused to let the word pass his lips. Suddenly he whirled his horse, ground steel into its flanks, and whirled away as though pursued by phantoms.

Fremont Tallant's riders looked at each other sharply. It was the first time any of them had ever seen their boss display emotion or evade an issue. They mounted silently and followed.

But the seamy old cowboy who had come with Fremont Tallant lingered there in the saddle. He looked at Jay.

"Howdy, kid," he remarked.

Jay moved out. "Howdy, Shanty," he said. And he fought back the sudden lump

that came in his throat as he shook hands. He should have known that Shanty Bemis would never forget him or turn against him.

Shanty, range boss of the Tumbling T for longer than Jay could remember, had been a second father to Jay and Jane. It was to Shanty the twins had always gone with their childhood problems, and it was Shanty's word that had always been final with them.

Time had warped Shanty Bemis a little more, thinning his stringy old hair, and frosting it where it straggled down on his weathered forehead. The usual cud of tobacco lumped his knotty cheek. He cussed the same old rheumy twinges as he lifted his bowed frame to the ground.

Shanty ignored the ten years that had passed, overlooked the change in Jay. "Jane will be right happy to see yuh, boy," he said. "She was askin' me about you only the other day."

"How is she, Shanty?"

Shanty looked at him strangely. "Healthy enough, I reckon. An' purty as a red wagon. The baby is kinda keepin' her busy. He's red-headed an' hard tuh handle as a fuzztail colt."

"Baby? Then Jane is married?"

Shanty spat deliberately. "Two years ago. I reckon you'll remember the man she married. Lang Minter, the lawyer's son."

Jay's face fell. "Yeah," he answered after a moment. "I remember Lang Minter. Went to school with him."

Shanty shrugged. "I know how yuh feel, boy. Minter wasn't the man for your sister. I recollect how he used tuh lay for yuh, an' maul yuh on the way home from school. An' how one day, after Pug Smith had taught you how to use your mitts, yuh smacked hell out of him, and sent him high-tailin' home, howlin' for his maw. But he's your brother-in-law now."

Jay's lips tightened. "Why did Jane marry that whelp?"

"He wasn't no common cowman's son, Jay. His dad was from one of them first families, an' wore a white collar every day down to that lawyer's office, which had his name in gilt letters on a glass door."

"I savvy," Jay muttered. "Jane was brow-beaten into it."

"After you cut yore string there wasn't nobody to help her stand against your paw," Shanty stated. "He had his way with Jane—juest as he has had his way with everyone but you."

JAY LOOKED at him, a cold glint in his eyes. "So you're trying to tell me that Jane needs me? Is Lang Minter—?" He paused. "Where is she, Shanty? At the ranch?"

"Nope. She lives in Big Lodge. Minter's cashier in yore father's bank. He's runnin' with a bad crowd, Jay. I watched him last night, settin' in a stiff stud game in Jules Duprey's honkatonk—with a black-haired dancin' girl hoverin' at his elbow. I don't figure yore dad knows where Lang spends most of his spare time. The old man wouldn't sleep at nights if he knew his cashier was hobnobbin' with oily crooks like Jules Duprey an' that bunch that hangs out at the Red Rocket."

"Duprey," Jay repeated. "He's new to me."

Shanty nodded. "You'll find the town changed, Jay. An' fer the worse. They've hit gold in the Thunderclouds. Big Lodge has boomed an' gone hard an' bad. Buzzards have come in. Killers produce a man for breakfast right frequent. Outlaws are makin' it tough on Wells Fargo an' as a sideline they're runnin' Tumblin' T cattle. The ranch ain't doin' so well. If it wasn't for the bank, I've a hunch yore dad would be out of the cattle business. The bank makes money, but the ranch loses it jest as fast."

"Got any *dinero* on you, Shanty?" Jay asked. "I need new clothes."

Shanty emptied his pockets, passing over

two gold pieces and some paper currency. "Don't forget to shave, kid," he grinned. "Them whiskers look like a forest fire."

Shanty turned to his horse. He looked at the house. "This is another mistake your dad made," he commented. "Buck Sevier's a square-shootin' cowboy an' his sister's a thoroughbred. Tell 'em that not all the Tumblin' T riders have worked ag'in 'em. Nor all the Tallants. Jane tried tuh reason with her father, but she didn't get any place."

Shanty lifted himself into the saddle. "Lang Minter needs some stern advice, boy," he added. "Maybe a hell of a good workin' over with your fists will do it—but don't ever let Jane know what yo're up to. She'd never forgive yuh. She's never made a whimper tuh me, an' she'd be the last to ask you to help."

Jay stood watching Shanty ride away. He turned to find Bessie Sevier standing on the step, staring at him strangely. And her brother stood in the door, moody and thoughtful.

"Wind's dyin' down," Jay remarked slowly. "It's clearin' off. A good day to hit the trail. I'll be shovin' along. If you'd loan me a horse to Big Lodge I'll be grateful."

Buck Sevier nodded. "That short-coupled roan in the shed is yours for keeps if you want, Tallant. I'm not forgettin' that you staved off a stretched neck for me."

Jay saddled the horse. As he was about to mount, Bessie stepped into the gloomy shed. She was muffled to her wolfskin coat. Her eyes were deep pools.

"Goodbye," she said, and held out her hand.

Her fingers were warm and firm against Jay's chilled palm. "I wish you luck—and contentment," she murmured, her eyes were steady on his. "Above all, contentment. And you'll never find it if you continue to drift. You'll always drift until you begin to fight these things that drive you on. And you can fight. The world knows that."

He remembered Bessie Sevier as she had looked when she was fighting to get a gun to save her brother. He recalled the strength with which she had fought the blizzard to save the cattle and to save him—and the odds she and her brother were up against.

"I'll come back here some day," Jay said abruptly.

Color rose to her cheeks, as she saw his meaning. "You're a Tallant," she said, and turned away. "It's your duty to stand by your father. Goodbye."

She almost ran back to the house. But as Jay rode away he looked back, and saw her face at the window watching him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ranch of Broken Hearts!

BIG LODGE was no longer the sleepy cowtown Jay remembered. In the brittle, still cold of the mid-afternoon that had succeeded the blizzard, the town sprawled far over the bench, reaching out with its frame and mud shacks toward the foothills of the Thunderclouds. A stamp mill thundered beyond the railroad yards, and Jay could see the mouths of two big shafts on the mountainside to the west where hard rock shafts were being ripped deeper day and night.

Grubstake miners and hopeful prospectors, driven from the mountains by winter, hugged the stoves in the score of bar-rooms and gambling houses that lifted their ornate fronts along the rutted, snowy street.

Jay left the horse at a livery, paying a week's feed bill, with instructions to return the animal to Buck Sevier at the first opportunity.

He inquired the way to the home of his sister.

The hostler eyed him dubiously, but directed him to a side street, and described a green clapboarded cottage.

Moving away Jay saw one familiar structure. The Big Lodge Stockman's Bank

occupied the same severe, granite structure on the main corner. Fremont Tallant had founded that bank, and was its president, and principal stockholder.

The blinds were drawn, for it was past banking hours. A man came from the door as Jay passed on the opposite sidewalk. Jay had to look twice to identify Lang Minter, his brother-in-law.

Minter, heavy-set, with florid face and dark sideburns was a stylish figure in dove-gray overcoat and cloth stiff hat. He twirled a walking stick, and passed by Jay without a second glance.

Jay watched Minter stroll languidly through the gilded door of a honkytonk whose sign proclaimed it as Jules Duprey's Red Rocket.

Jay paused a moment, then shrugged and went on. He bought a cheap suit at a store, went to a hotel, bathed and shaved. He viewed himself in the distorted dresser mirror, studying the little, tight puckers that had come around his mouth and eyes, the lines of repression that lay heavily about his thin lips. He wondered if Jane would recognize him.

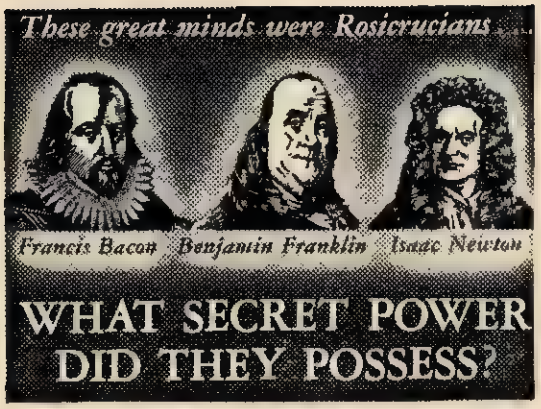
It was dusk when he turned into the gate of the little cottage. He saw the outline of winter-bound flower beds, and the neatness of the yard. He had to steel himself to twist the handle of the bell.

The door opened. A sweet-faced young woman, with a curly-haired child hanging to her apron-hem stood there.

"Jay!" Then Jane rushed into his arms, half-laughing, half-sobbing. "Jay! Is it really you? It's been so long."

Later, in the parlor with the boy on his knee, Jay watched that first joyous animation fade. Shadows came back to Jane's sea-blue eyes. Jane Tallant was a comely woman, with her full, oval features, red-bronze hair and shapely figure.

She stroked her child's silky hair. "He was christened Langford Minter, Junior," she said. "But I call him Jay."



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"Where's Lang?" Jay asked casually.

Her face betrayed nothing. "I'm afraid he won't be home until late," she said. "He's so busy at the bank. Dad made him cashier six months ago, you know."

RAGE SEETHED in Jay. He condemned his father for forcing Jane into this existence as a forgotten, neglected wife, waiting here alone in this tomb-like house with its stuffy, Eastern furnishings. Too proud to exhibit the vain longings in her soul, or her heart-break, she was also too courageous to complain.

"Why did you do it, Jane?" he grinned savagely. "Why did you marry Lang Minter?"

She went pale. "Don't, Jay," she breathed pleadingly.

"I'll take you away," he rasped. "I know why you did it. To please your father. Because he wanted his daughter to marry a Minter. Because Lang Minter's father was a stiff-necked lawyer and a politician. Because—"

She came to her feet. "Stop! What right have you to talk like that to me. You, who ran away and broke Dad's heart!"

She paused, seeing the cynical light leap into his face.

"Yes, Jay, I mean just that," she rushed on. "You were too young to know just how much he thought of you, what plans he had made for you, and the high hopes he had in store. He loved you. He loves me. He wanted me to marry Lang. He had his heart set on it."

"And you sacrificed yourself, so as not to hurt him like I did," Jay said bitterly. "If I hadn't gone with the wild bunch, this wouldn't have happened to you."

She came to him then. "No, Jay," she said steadily. "I didn't mean it that way. I'm no martyr. I have my home, my baby boy. What more could a woman want?"

"You have everything—but happiness," Jay said grimly.

She looked at him with fear. "Jay don't interfere in this. Lang is the father of my baby. I wouldn't ever want anything to happen that might hurt him when he grows up. For his sake, at least, I'll be a good wife."

Jay kissed her, and fell into a gray mood. He had believed that he knew the utmost meaning of gameness and courage. He had seen men die with their boots on, going up against overwhelming odds with a laugh and a jest. Now he knew that he had never more than scratched the surface of human bravery. It was easy to die. Even a coward could die. But life was the real challenge.

And he thought of Bessie Sevier and her brother out there standing resolutely against certain ruin and perhaps death. They were facing life, too, not running away from it. Jay Tallant called himself a yellow coward. For he realized then as he never had before, that he had run away from life.

After a time he left his sister's house. Fierce restlessness drove him to roam the wintry streets. At last, man-like, he disregarded his sister's plea. He headed through the freezing darkness and entered the Red Rocket. He meant to have a talk with Lang Minter. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Drifter's Boothill Play

THE RED ROCKET was crowded, a tinseled blonde sang on a tiny stage at the rear. Gambling layouts were busy, and the bar was three deep. A battery of cannon stoves glowed down the length of the flat-topped, smoke-fogged honkytonk.

Jay found a place at the long bar, and toyed with a drink while he sized up the place. He saw no sign of Minter in the crowd.

A brawny man, his long, travel-stained coat rimed with frost, pushed roughly to his side at the bar. Jay glanced up annoyed, then looked closer. A mirthless smile tugged at his lips.

"Hello there, Hickman," he murmured.

The big man whirled, startled, smothering a curse. He had thick, brutal features, with a crooked nose and pale eyes.

"You made a mistake, fella," he finally growled. "My name's Jones. Arch Jones."

"The name was Sam Hickman when I brought you back out of Mexico, after that stage was blown up outside of Douglas and the express box taken," Jay said quietly. "And it's the name you went to Yuma Prison under. I reckon you didn't serve your twenty years, Sam. It wasn't good behavior that got you out."

Sam Hickman, cold-blooded killer and Border runner, turned away and moved through the crowd. Jay watched him grimly. Sam Hickman had sworn some day to kill him. And Hickman was a man who preferred to shoot from the dark rather than take his vengeance openly.

Jay noticed two more hard-visaged patrons glance at Hickman, who moved on through the door into the outer darkness. And these two gun-packing men soon left the Red Rocket also.

Jay heard the gossip of gold all along the bar—of pay lodes, and outcrops and prospects, and of the latest outlaw exploit. A paymaster had been murdered on his way to one of the shafts, and ten thousand in cash taken.

"It was the same outlaw bunch that's been raisin' hell for two months around here most likely," someone said. "An' these sneakin' curs don't leave any livin' witnesses. I seen the cleanup wagon they dynamited in Loco Canyon a month ago. Three men blown tuh hell an' a thousand ounces of bar bullion gone. An' how about that train that was ditched into Owl Crick—"

This sounded to Jay like some of Sam Hickman's methods. Then his attention veered. An aproned waiter, carrying a tray of bottles and glasses, had entered a private poker room off to the left. Through the

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briefly-opened door Jay glimpsed a five-hand stud game in operation under the white circle of a shaded lamp. One of the players was his brother-in-law, Lang Minter.

Jay moved upon that closed door. As he reached for the knob, a lounging, cold-eyed house guard, with a dead cigarette dangling in his lip and a low-slung holster, barred the portal with an arm.

"Private game, feller. Move along."

"I'm inviting myself in," Jay murmured. "Here's my ticket."

The gunman felt the ticket. It was the maw of Jay's .45 jammed hard into his side. "You're ambling in with me," Jay said. "Otherwise you might bring a few of your pals to invite me out before I was ready to leave."

He prodded the trouble-hawk through the door, then kicked it closed behind him. Faces lifted from the table and took in the situation.

Jay had learned long ago to size up odds and find the keystone of the opopsition. In this case he tabbed a wiry little gambler with a waxed moustache and black, opaque eyes, as the one to watch.

Lang Minter was half-drunk. He was the last to look up. There were no chips on the table. Nothing but gold double eagles. And the stack in front of Minter was small in comparison with the others around the table. Jay appraised the remaining three players and sized them up as professional card sharps, though they passed as mining men, judging from their garb.

Jay estimated that there was at least five thousand dollars in sight on the table. "Stiff game for a bank cashier, don't you think, Lang?" he remarked.

Lang Minter peered close, then uttered a thick, outraged oath. "Where in hell did you drop from?" he snarled. "And what do you want?"

"Pick up what money the buzzards haven't taken and come on, Lang," Jay explained curtly. "You're going home."

The little, suavely-garbed gambler placed his hands against the table his black eyes slitting.

"Don't do it," Jay said pleasantly. "You're thinking of shoving that table into me. I'll drive that diamond stud through your brisket with a hot slug if you try it."

LANG MINTER'S face went chalky. "Don't start anything, Jules, for God's sake," he cried out, cringing. "That's Jay Tallant. You've heard of him—the Arizona gun-hawk!"

Jules Duprey's waxen eyelids fluttered, and his wiry body slackened. He shrugged, and placed his hands flat on the top of the table. "The warning is appreciated," he shrugged. "So this is the black sheep of the Tallant family? Under the circumstances I cannot say the meeting is a pleasure."

Jay lifted Minter from his chair, sent him reeling to the door. "Stand quiet," he warned the others as he backed out. Then linking arms with Minter, he marched him to the sidewalk outside.

"How much did they take from you in that game?" he asked.

"None of your damned—" Minter began to snarl.

Jay's grip clamped savagely on his arm. "You lost plenty, I reckon. Where's that money coming from, Minter?"

Minter glared, and his spoiled face began to weaken.

"I know," Jay said with a nod. "From the bank. How much do you owe the bank?"

Minter tried to mumble a denial, but Jay slapped him with a hard palm. And Minter's shabby bravado crumbled. "About—about eight thousand," he admitted, with a whine of self-pity. "I lost most of it tonight. I'm in a hell of a fix, Jay. I've been borrowing from the bank, intending to pay back when my luck changed. But the damned cards have stayed against me."

"They always do when you play with wolves like that bunch," Jay grated. "I take it the little snake was Jules Duprey. What are you going to do about the shortage at the bank—ask your father-in-law to make good your losses?"

Minter became frantic. "Don't ever let him know!" he begged. "If he ever found it out, he'd be the first to hound me into prison. Damn him, he's got no heart, no soul. He wouldn't care whether I was his son-in-law or not. Him and his preaching about hard work and righteousness."

"I see you've learned to know him," Jay commented dryly. "He hates crooks and drifters."

"I'll kill myself," Minter sobbed.

"Here's a gun," Jay smiled.

Minter thrust it away with a whimpering curse. Jay shook him like a limp rag. "You yellow, sniveling pup," he gritted. "Breaking Jane's heart, hanging out with crooks like Jules Duprey, making a thief of yourself while she stays there at home with the baby, eating her soul out. I'd put the slug in you myself, but it would only cause more grief for her."

"Damn you, Tallant, let me alone! I know what I'm doing. I'm not a fool. I'll pay that money back. I know where I can get it. And I'm going to do it."

"Where?"

"That's my secret," Minter said.

Jay slapped him again. "Spill it," he growled. "What's your plan?"

Minter's mean little soul cringed. He couldn't evade those bleak eyes that looked like circles of ice in the reflection from distant lights.

"I'm going to turn outlaw," he stuttered.

Jay laughed with helpless scorn. "Outlaw? Why, you spineless pup, it takes sand and guts to turn outlaw."

"I'll show you, Tallant. The bank is sending out some cash tomorrow for deposit in the federal bank at Laramie. Now do you understand?"

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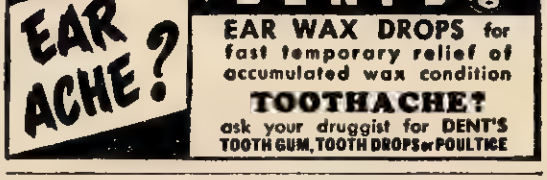
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"Going to hold up a train single-handed?" Jay jeered. "Talk sense."

"It'll be simpler than that," Minter whispered impressively, a boastful note entering his voice. "The money will leave Big Lodge in the ranch wagon tomorrow. It'll be packed in with a load of grub for the Tumbling T. Your father has been smuggling gold and money out of camp by that method for the past two months, ever since the outlaws got busy. The box is put aboard the train at the Antelope Springs water tank."

JAY'S silence encouraged him. "Old Saddlepack Barnes always drives the wagon," Minter added. "And there's only one shotgun guard concealed inside. I can handle the guard. It'll be easy."

"How'll you handle the guard?" Jay asked thinly.

Minter looked at him, and shrugged. "You treacherous rat," Jay spat. "I know how you'd handle him if it came to a pinch. You'd kill him. Cowards always do. And you'd be run down and lynched. Think up something else, Lang. You'd bungle this. Think up something more in your line."

"There's no other way," Minter groaned. "You don't savvy. I've got to work fast. The bank examiners will be here any day. Your father told me so this morning. I'm a ruined man unless I get that money right away. Ruined—do you hear?"

"I'm not giving a damn about you," Jay growled. "I'm thinking of Jane and her baby. That's where the real disgrace will fall. Nothing could hurt a man like you. How much money in this shipment tomorrow, Minter?"

Minter hesitated. "Not much," he said. "Just about enough to cover up what I've lost."

Jay's mouth lightened in a bitter, protesting silence. "You wouldn't have a chance, Minter," he said flatly. "You know that. Saddlepack or the gun-guard would be sure to recognize you. Even if you got away with the money, you wouldn't have an alibi. The old man would suspect you."

He stood in somber reflection for a time. "I'll do this dirty job," he stated flatly. "I'll deliver the money to you."

Lan Minter's face lighted. "You will?" he breathed joyfully. "Jay, I'll never forget—"

"Hold your tongue, you yellow lizard," Jay snapped. "You knew damned well I'd do it. That's why you was so willing to tell me all about it. You know how much I think of Jane. After I get you out of this spot, Minter, you're going to disappear from Big Lodge. Jane is going to have the chance to divorce you, and forget you ever lived. She's young enough to make her life over again, to try and find real happiness. Is that clear?"

Minter began a bitter protest, but bit off the words as he saw Jay's face. "Now," Jay shrugged. "When does the ranch wagon hit the trail?

CHAPTER SIX

Blood on the Trail

SNOW began to sift down from the leaden clouds that had pushed in to enclose the Thundercloud country at noon. It came down gently at first, almost soothingly. There was no promise of wind, and the temperature had lifted above zero.

Jay looked up at the gray sky, and knew that before dark the range would be buried deep in a white blanket—a blanket that would cover the trail of a wanted man.

He peered through the increasing snow, watching the Tumbling T supply wagon crawl up the narrow trail that mounted the face of Red Bluff. Jay crouched behind a boulder near the top of the steep ascent.

He pulled a bandanna mask over the bridge of his nose, and made sure the knot would slip. He set a ragged black felt hat down to hide even his eyebrows. The horse Minter had furnished him, a big, solid bay,

was tethered back among the cedars out of sight. Cotton gloves, and a mouldy oilskin that he had stolen from a mule yard in town, swathed him effectively.

Jay's eyes turned briefly to the tiny dot that marked a ranch house out in the river flats three miles away. The ranch house was beginning to fade from view as the snow came down heavier. He was thinking of Bessie Sevier's big, hopeful eyes, and her curving grace, picturing her there in the kitchen of that little log-built house, a smudge of flour on her nose. An aching loneliness beat at him. . . .

Jay drew his gun as the steaming team came up the narrow trail, and passed his hiding place, leaning against the weight of the loaded big spring wagon with the soiled canvas top. Saddlepack Barnes, the Tumbling T cook, was alone on the seat, drowsing in a buffalo robe, a pipe in his teeth.

As the wagon lurched by, Jay leaped out, grasped the tail-gate and vaulted into the bed beneath the low hood. A chunky cowboy, who lay bedded down on sacks of spuds and beans, made a quick, startled move to seize a sawed-off shotgun. But Jay covered him.

"Hold it," Jay said hoarsely. "Lift 'em."

Saddlepack Barnes twisted around on the seat, and his pipe fell and broke on on a wheel hub. "Pull up that team," Jay growled.

He shoved the shotgun out of reach. Forcing them to stand, he took their holster guns. He made them turn their backs, then looked over the load.

Lang Minter had told him the money box was cached in a sack of potatoes. He tested the three sacks of spuds with his boot and felt the unyielding outline of the concealed box.

"Spotted 'em luggin' a sack o' spuds outta the bank about daylight this mornin'," he chuckled. "An' I'm curious."

He tugged at the sack with his left hand. Its weight was like lead. It required effort

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to roll it to the tail and dump it into the snow.

He took the shotgun with him as he leaped. ""Hi-yah!" he yelled, and stung the roans with frozen mud. Snorting, they jerked the ranch wagon into a lurching run. They topped the grade, and Jay could hear Saddlepack's profanity floating back as he sawed at the reins, seeking to check the team.

Jay turned grimly to the sack, and bent to lift it. He muttered, puzzled more than ever by its weight.

A sudden suspicion galvanized him. He dragged it off the trail, ripped the burlap with his knife. Potatoes rolled away as he dragged out an iron bound box. He smashed the lid with a rock.

Then he stood staring down for silent seconds. There were half a dozen packets of yellowbacks in the box. But mainly it was filled with dull yellow bars of metal.

Gold bullion!

"That lying rat," Jay suddenly spat, fury sending a red haze to his eyes. "Damn him. There's close to three hundred pounds of gold here. A fortune! And Minter must have known it!"

He decided to take the currency and leave the bullion there. Tumbling T riders would be here within two hours in the hope of finding the trail of the lone highwayman, and there was little chance of anyone else noticing the box, with the snow swirling down blindly.

Jay stowed the money in the breast of his mackinaw under the slicker. He heard a sound, started to whirl.

A gun drove a savage lash of flame at him from a boulder thirty feet away. He felt the deadening impact of a bullet in his back. And felt himself plunging with fearful speed down into a black pit.

Jay Tallant collapsed slowly forward on his face across the smashed express box....

With cat-like wariness a man in a black slicker came gliding up, his gun ready. It was Jules Duprey, the owner of the Red Rocket. He stood over Jay, the hammer of the gun lifting again for a finishing shot.

Then Duprey shrugged, and holstered the gun. He could see the blood welling from the hole in the back of Jay's ragged slicker. Another bullet seemed unnecessary.

DUPREY dragged Jay's limp form to the edge of the bluff and rolled it over. He watched it roll and tumble down a frozen shale slide, and come to rest among scrub brush at the bottom, more than a hundred yards below.

Moving fast, the gambler brought up Jay's horse, and his own mount. He had brought packsacks for the bullion. Soon he rode away into the cedars, leading Jay's horse, across which the gold was slung.

The snow drifted down silently. It increased to a dense white flood as though the skies meant to bury the Thundercloud range forever. The white blanket soon covered the little frozen blotch beside the trail where Jay Tallant had fallen. And it also wiped out all tracks.

It began to drift over Jay Tallant's still form, there in the little landslide of dislodged shale that his body had brought down in its descent.

Early, gloomy twilight gathered over the range. The long howl of a lobo wolf ran eerily among the cedars on the bluff, and down in the river flats, the defiant, answering yammer of two coyotes sounded.

The smell of blood rode the snowstorm....

Buck Sevier, heading back to the ranch after riding fence since morning, paused his horse and listened to that long wolf howl as it was repeated. His lean face drew into a listening frown. He had heard a distant, muffled gunshot from the direction of the red shale bluff a few minutes earlier.

He thought of the hot supper Bessie would have ready, then reluctantly pulled his hatbrim lower against the heavy drive of the snow, and swung his mount toward the bluff. He dragged his saddle gun in

the hope of getting a shot at the gray loafer wolf which pulled down one of his calves a few days before.

He veered along the base of the shale bluff, pausing now and then to listen. Twilight deepened, and he finally gave it up. He swung his horse back toward the ranch.

Then he heard a groan from the brush nearby. . . .

Later, Bessie came racing from the kitchen as her brother staggered in carrying Jay's limp form.

"It's Tallant," he panted.

She helped lift Jay to the bunk. They cut away his slicker and mackinaw and his shirt. As she did so packets of yellowbacks spilled out on the floor. She looked up at her brother with a startled question in her eyes.

Buck shook his head indifferently, but afterwards his mouth grew tight. He did not mention that Jay Tallant's face had been masked when he found him lying in the snow.

Bessie pushed the money aside without another glance, and, with her brother's help, began working on Jay. They bathed away the dried blood. Her eyes lighted hopefully after a moment.

"Look!" she exclaimed gladly. "That bullet didn't go through him. His heavy clothing turned it in time. It glanced along his shoulder blade. It's lodged just under the skin. An ugly wound, but it was mainly the shock of it that has knocked him out."

Her brother nodded as he helped her with the bandaging. Now and then his thoughtful eyes roved to the money on the floor near their feet.

After a time, Buck gathered up the packets of yellowbacks with a casual air, and thrust them out of sight under the mattress of the bunk beneath Jay.

IT WAS nearly two hours before Jay began to move. With an effort, his eyes opened. He stared dazedly at Bessie who

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knelt beside him. When he became certain it really was her face, he tried to lift himself from the bunk. She laughed a little, though her eyes became suddenly bright, and held him back.

"Take it easy," she warned. "Buck found you out in the snow. Someone shot you."

Recollection came with a rush. Jay's eyes flashed to Buck who stood across the room, watching him with veiled intensity.

"Where are my clothes?" Jay demanded, forcing himself to a sitting position in spite of Bessie's protest. "That old slicker, the black hat an' the gloves."

"Right here," Buck replied laconically. "An' the money you was carryin' is hid under your mattress. It fell out as we took care of that bullet puncture."

"Get rid of those clothes," Jay ordered hoarsely. "Burn 'em. They're dynamite, Buck."

Bessie Sevier stared at him, then whirled to look at her brother. Something in Buck's eyes, sent all color fleeing from her cheeks. She turned again to Jay.

"But I don't understand," she said shakily.

Jay faced her squarely, and there was agony deep in his eyes. "I got that money in a holdup," he stated grimly. "By this time men are hunting for me. The chances are they'll come here to question Buck. I've got to ride before that happens. Don't you understand, now?"

Buck said nothing. He picked up the blood-stained clothes, and turned toward the fireplace.

As he did so the door was thrust violently open. Fremont Tallant, gun in hand, leaped in, snow swirling away from his hat and shoulders. At his heels were Shanty Bemis and two more cowboys, white with snow.

Fremont Tallant saw what Buck had in his hands. His eyes flashed triumphantly. "Drop that slicker, Sevier," he grated. "Lift your hands. I knew from the first that you'd be the man we wanted."

Then Fremont Tallant saw Jay there in the bunk, and he went rigid with shock. As he stared, all the dominant vigor in the man seemed to crumble, leaving him haggard.

A grim premonition of the truth laid its heavy shadow in his eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Smoke Signal

BESSIE SEVIER had stood there ashen pale against the ruddy firelight. She watched the faces of Jay and his father, and her body stiffened. Instinctively she glided in front of Jay in a fierce little protecting move.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

Fremont Tallant's voice was a dry, mechanical rattle. "You know what we want. Search the house boys. The gold must be here. And keep Sevier and this—this other man covered."

Jay pulled himself to his feet, swaying a little. "You'll find the bills under this mattress," he remarked coldly. "I hid it there. Buck Sevier and his sister know nothing about this. Buck found me out there wounded, and brought me in."

"And he was going to burn that slicker which he knew would betray both of you," his father returned stonily. "I was convinced from the first that Sevier was behind this. But I didn't expect to find my own son also guilty."

"Listen to me," Jay cried hoarsely. "I held up the wagon singlehanded. I was shot by someone afterwards. Buck Sevier's entirely innocent!"

His father's face was an implacable gray mask. "What did you do with the bullion?" he demanded.

Jay shook his head. "I didn't hold up the wagon for the gold," he remarked. "I wanted cash. I didn't expect to find gold. As I stood over the box someone shot me from cover. The man who did that took the bullion."

Fremont Tallant's face did not change. But his voice broke a little. "I'll appeal to whatever decency is left in you, Jay Tallant. If that bullion isn't recovered at once, the Big Lodge Stockman's Bank will close tomorrow. When this news gets out a run is bound to start. And the bank is in no condition right now to meet a run."

Jay shook his head. "I've told the truth."

Jay believed that it was his brother-in-law, Lang Minter who had shot him. It seemed clear to Jay that Minter, lacking the courage to perform the hold-up himself, had waited until the deed was performed, then had cashed in on the profits by attempting a cold-blooded murder.

But Jay set his lips against that accusation, as he thought of Jane. He had no proof. It was futile to make an empty accusation. Minter would deny everything, and laugh at him. Only Jane would be the sufferer from such a situation.

It became clear to Jay that he would have to pay the price. "I can't tell you where the bullion is," he said grimly.

Fremont Tallant's shoulders sagged. He turned wearily. "Take them to jail," he said brokenly. "The girl also. Her brother is in on this robbery—and she has guilty knowledge of it."

Jay was stunned. Then he leaped at his father, a choked, furious cry bursting from him. "Damn you!" he shouted. "I told you they were innocent. You know they are. You know I'm not a liar. You're just taking this chance to get rid of them."

Jay was pushed back by the cowboys, as his father turned away. "Listen to me," Jay said between clenched teeth. "If you harm the Seviers for this, some day I'll come back to hunt you down, an'—"

"Easy, boy," Shanty Bemis pleaded. "He's your own father—your own—"

"My God, Shanty!" Jay panted. "You're not going to let them put Bessie Sevier in a rathole jail, too? She's an angel—do you hear?"

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More Tumbling T cowboys crowded in. They pushed Shanty aside and moved upon Buck and Jay, who fought like madmen. But all their fighting did no good. They were slugged, carried to the horses and bound hand and foot in the saddles. And Bessie Sevier was forced to mount and ride with them through the thick snow to Big Lodge.

Before dawn a cell door closed on Jay and Buck Sevier. And Bessie was a prisoner in the barred, iron-portaled room in the sheriff's quarters, in another wing of the jail.

The sheriff brought a doctor to look after Jay's wound. The bullet-shock had passed now, and after the doctor had gone, Jay paced the cell like a madman. Remorse tore at him as he thought of Bessie held in a cell like a common felon. And her brother faced a long term in prison.

"Take it easy, Tallant," Buck Sevier advised repeatedly. "You'll go loco. You're in no shape to keep moving around like that. We're in for it, and might as well get ready to take our medicine. I ain't holdin' it against you, nor is Bessie. Luck broke that way. That's all."

AS THE morning advanced they heard an uproar break out in the streets. A confused tide of angry voices beat through the stone walls, and over the sound came the roar of six-shooters. They heard the distant crash of breaking glass and the sound of splintering wood. Then, after an interval it halted as abruptly as though a curtain had been dropped. Jay listened and heard nothing more from the street. Big Lodge seemed suddenly to have become a tomb.

It was noon before the garrulous old turnkey brought news to the cell.

"You boys sure raised hell," the turnkey growled. "The Tallant bank didn't open its doors this mornin'. When the word got around, a bunch of gents thought it would be a good idea to open the bank with axes. The sheriff tried tuh stop 'em an' got a slug in his laig. They wrecked the bank an' then began huntin' your dad, but they didn't have to hunt far. He come ridin' in from the ranch, hell-for-leather. Right into the midst of them miners an' cowmen whose money was tied up in the bank. An' he done what nobody else could do. By God, he cooled that mob!"

The turnkey's fingers were trembling as he wiped away cold sweat that came at the recollection. "I thought sure they'd fill ol' Fremont Tallant full of lead. But he set on his horse an' lifted his hand in that old, stern way of his, an' by golly they listened to him. He told 'em he'd pay dollar for dollar. The Tumblin' T is t' be sold, an' everything else the old man's got will be thrown intuh the pot tuh pay off the depositors. I reckon it'll wreck him."

Jay's lips were white. All this he had brought on his father. He stood at the cell door, staring at a blank stone wall, while the torments of hell ate at his soul. His father a ruined man; Jane with a broken-heart! And most damning of all, Bessie and Buck Sevier branded as criminals.

A moan of sheer agony forced itself through his lips, and Buck Sevier turned away.

Then Jane came to the cell door, and kissed Jay through the bars. Neither in her words or in her eyes was there a hint of reproach.

"What can I do to help, Jay?" she sobbed. "I know you told the truth. But nobody will listen to me."

"Help Buck and Bessie Sevier," Jay said, his knuckles white on the bars. "They're innocent. I love Bessie Sevier—and Buck is white clear through."

He became aware that Buck had moved to his side, and that he and Jane were looking at each other. Tears filled Jane's eyes. Abruptly she turned and fled from the cell room.

Buck walked to the bunk and sat down silently, a queer twist of pain on his lips.

"You know my sister?" Jay asked quietly after a time.

"Yeah," Buck muttered grimly. "I used to meet her on the trail once in a while. Danced with her at the school-house once. I had hoped—well. . . . she married . . ."

Jay Tallant cursed as he paced the cell throughout that day. Outside, there were sounds of Big Lodge resuming its normal activity. Fremont Tallant's promise had lifted the specter of ruin from the minds of many men. But night brought no surcease from the black thoughts that tortured Jay. Hour after hour he lay tense and sleepless on the hard jail bunk. Midnight came, and the mocking silence of the stone walls seemed to press in on him. He had to fight the impulse to rise and beat at those walls. Somehow, he had to get Bessie and Buck Sevier out of this.

Buck was silent in the other bunk, but Jay knew that he was awake also. And somewhere inside these gray stone walls Bessie, a prisoner in a cheerless, chill room with barred windows, was haggard, distraught and without hope.

Then Jay's head lifted. He lay taut and listening. Sounds drove in from the lighted jail office beyond the steel door at the front, where a turnkey and a deputy were on duty. There was a crash, a suddenly stifled shout and the muffled sound of leaping boots.

The door of the office swung open, admitting a dim band of light down the line of cells. Masked men came running in, snarling harsh, low-voiced warnings for silence at the four or five other prisoners in the cells. They came to the door of the cage which Jay and Buck occupied. Keys rattled; the slugged turnkey moaned.

Buck and Jay stood side by side against the far wall as masked men looked in at them, guns in their hands. A man chuckled mockingly, "This ain't a necktie party, but we're takin' you two out of this calaboose," he said.

Jay knew that voice.

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BEHIND the mask, through which little wicked eyes gleamed, was the face of Sam Hickman, the former Border outlaw. The man Jay had once sent to Yuma prison, and who had sworn some day to kill him.

"What's on your mind, Hickman?" Jay asked easily. "You're not opening this stony lonesome for me just because you like me."

"Come on," Hickman growled. "Rattle yore hocks. We don't aim tuh linger here all night."

"It runs in my mind that we'd be better off here," Jay remarked.

"Ain't you the ungrateful cuss!" Hickman sneered. "You comin' out of there, or do we have to pack yuh out like cold beef? You too, Sevier. You hombres are worth about a hundred thousand dollars to us, so don't be bashful. You're quittin' this jail whether you want to or not."

Jay and Buck savvied then. They glanced at each other with tightening lips. "You're after that bullion, eh?" Jay said scornfully. "You're on the wrong trail, Hickman. I don't know where it is."

"You can't run that on me," the outlaw growled. "Punch 'em out of there, boys."

Gun muzzles prodded them viciously, forcing them out of the cell. They were marched to the office. Another door opened, and Bessie Sevier ashen and bewildered, was pushed in by two more masked men.

"Damn you Hickman!" Jay growled. "Leave her out of this."

"Figured I'd have a better chance of gettin' the truth out of all three of yuh," Hickman chuckled. Then he gave a signal.

Gags were jammed in their mouths, and their wrists tied. The turnkey and deputy lay bound and gagged on the floor. They'd been sandbagged. The outer silence in the town showed that the capture of the jail had passed undiscovered.

One by one, in the grip of masked outlaws, the two man and the girl were prodded out, and hustled around the corner of the jail into the darkness.

Only the honkatonks and gambling houses showed light against the wintry darkness. It was the slack hour after midnight when bartenders and professional gamblers have a breathing spell before the next shift of miners came from the shafts in the hills to give Big Lodge another spin.

The Red Rocket storm door opened half a block away, lancing a band of light out into the frozen street. A drunken patron emerged and reeled across the wagon-rutted snow. Jay saw him plainly in the honky-tonk door for an instant. It was Lang Minter.

Black fury boiled in Jay, bringing him to a stubborn halt. He tried to make Hickman understand that he wanted the gag removed. It was suddenly clear to Jay that the time for silence had passed. He was willing to sacrifice himself to shield his sister from sorrow and disgrace. But not even for Jane, could he sacrifice Bessie and Buck Sevier.

Hickman did not understand. He cursed Jay and shoved him ahead.

Then, from the heavy shadows at a corner hardly two hundred feet away a six-shooter spat wicked red flame. Two shots broke stridently against the keen silence of the night.

Lang Minter, a dark shadow against the snowbound street, paused in his reeling progress, his arms half-lifted. He fell limply into the snow, and a choking death scream dribbled away into silence.

Hickman, with a startled snort, propelled Jay around the corner of the jail off the sidewalk. Aided by the other outlaw he forced Jay at a run back among the buildings.

But still vividly etched in Jay's memory was the face he had seen plainly revealed over that murderous gun-flash there in the shadows. It was Jules Duprey, the gambler, who had killed Lang Minter—shot him in the back, with all the treachery that was so characteristic of the man, and for which some day he would pay.

TUMBLEWEED DARLING

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Drifter Can Die!

HICKMAN'S startled men were already in the saddle, their nerves jumpy. "Somebody got salivated," Hickman panted as he came up. "Wasn't none of our misery, though. A private killin', I reckon. Let's drift."

They boosted Jay into a saddle, and swept down through the dark side lanes. They passed the cottage in which Jane lived, and Jay shot a grim glance at the dark windows. At least, Jane was now forever freed from the duty of remaining loyal to Lang Minter.

They galloped onward through the thinning scatter of shacks and dugouts and away from Big Lodge, into the chill, raw darkness that preceded dawn. Hickman led the way. They swung into the main trail to the hills, which had been churned by ore wagons and jerkline mule teams into a frozen quagmire. After two miles Hickman swung off along a ridge swept clear of snow, the ice-clogged hoofs of the horses leaving little trace on the bare granite.

Gray light was beginning to break against the stark rims of the Thunderclouds when Hickman swung them into the lee of a cutbank above a frozen stream. Lodgepoles screened them here, and the foot-deep snow was sullied for the first time by the passage of the horses.

Hickman halted. "We better give the horses a breather," he growled. "We're safe enough. Likely they ain't found them two in the jail office yet, an' they'd have a hell of a time trailin' us down that wagon road. Let's have a drink an' take the gags from these three."

Hickman took a deep pull from a bottle, and grinned coldly at Jay. "Now, jest where did yuh cache that bullion, Tallant?" he asked suavely. "We might as well git that settled while we're waitin' here."

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"Turn them free, and perhaps I'll have something to tell you," Jay remarked, indicating Bessie and Buck.

Hickman chuckled and uncoiled a braided quirt. "Damn you, I've waited five years for a chance like this," he grated. "I'll make you talk."

And he laid the lash with all his strength across Jay's face.

The braided rawhide, stiff from the cold, cut to the bone. Blood streamed, and Jay's horse, startled, went to pieces. His wrists tied, blinded and half-dazed by the blow, Jay was thrown heavily into the snow.

Bessie Sevier screamed in horror. "You murderous coward—" Then an outlaw clapped a hand over her mouth.

Hickman dismounted, and stood with thick legs braced, grinning down at Jay. His brutal face was on fire. He waited until Jay had thrown off the first effects of that fall. Jay lifted himself to his knees, and looked at Hickman.

"Now will you talk?" Hickman snarled.

"You heard my terms," Jay said. "Not until Bessie Sevier and her brother are out of your reach."

Hickman swung the quirt again with an oath. Another raw, bleeding welt stung across Jay's face.

Jay took that blow, and his chill eyes did not change. Hickman lifted the quirt again, cursing, but now there was a helpless, baffled note in the outlaw's raving fury. Sam Hickman had realized that he could never torture or beat the truth from this inflexible man, whose eyes still carried the bleak promise of death.

Hickman stayed that third blow then. A cunning light grew in his eyes. Suddenly he turned to Bessie Sevier who was sagging, half-fainting from horror, in the saddle.

He dragged her down into the snow. "Maybe you'll talk," he rasped. "You know where Tallant an' yore brother hid that bullion. Don't be stubborn—it ain't worth it."

Jay came to his feet, and though his arms were bound, he leaped at Hickman like a maddened wolf. Hickman, guffawing, knocked him down with a fist.

"How about it?" he demanded, his fingers biting into Bessie's wrist.

"I'll tell," she panted. "Anything—anything! Only leave me alone."

The big outlaw guffawed in triumph. "You're showin' some sense, sister. Let's hear it."

Bessie looked at Jay, her eyes imploring silence. "I'll tell—if you'll turn my brother and Jay Tallant loose," she said grimly.

Hickman stared, then seized her furiously. "Yuh damn little fool," he snarled. "I ain't makin' bargains with any of yuh. Stop stallin', before I—"

Jay had come to his feet. He looked at Bessie. "It's no use," he said. "Let go of her, Hickman. She doesn't know anything about the gold. Neither does her brother. That's the truth, and I'll prove it to you.

Hickman eyed him suspiciously. "Keep talkin'," he growled.

JAY stood silent a moment. He understood clearly that it was futile to bargain with Hickman. The big outlaw did not dare release any of them, for he knew then that he would never be safe from vengeance. There was only one faint hope—to stall Hickman as long as possible in the hope that something would turn up.

Posses would be hunting them soon. It would be better to return to jail than remain in Hickman's hands. Better for Bessie Sevier, at least.

"I never had the bullion," Jay said. "But I know the man who can tell where it is."

Hickman began a scornful snort, then eyed him doubtfully. "Who?"

"Jules Duprey," Jay answered.

Hickman's scowl grew blacker. "What're yuh talkin' about? Where does that cardshark figure in this?"

Jay shrugged, and glanced at Bessie Sevier and her brother. "Listen: it was

tonight as we were coming out of the jail. Do you know who he murdered? It was Lang Minter, cashier in the bank."

Jay paused. "Lang Minter was my brother-in-law—a selfish, yellow rat! He was married to my twin sister, and made life a hell for her. I found him playing a stiff stud game with Duprey and a bunch of card slicks. Minter was short in his accounts at the bank, and as a result, he faced exposure."

He looked at Bessie. "He planned to rob that ranch wagon himself. But he's the kind that would have murdered the boys on the wagon to cover his tracks. I think a lot of my sister. I didn't want the man she married to end his life on the gallows. So I agreed to stick up that wagon.

"I took the money, and was going to leave the gold. Someone shot me then. I believed it was Minter, who followed me, and left me for dead when he took the bullion. Now I have a hunch it was Duprey. Minter probably saw his chance to get rich at my expense, and talked Duprey into following me. I suppose they were to split up the profits. Duprey isn't that kind. He silenced Minter permanently last night. And he's the only man alive who could know where that bullion is."

Jay's voice trailed away into silence. He could see Bessie's lips trembling. The way she looked at him sent an exalted, purifying flood through Jay Tallant. Understanding was there in her eyes, and a sad tenderness for him.

Sam Hickman stood eyeing him, thinking. "Damned if you haven't got me believin' you!" he finally growled.

He looked around at his men.

A murmur of assent went around. One slit-eyed outlaw spat. "I say we better fog along," he muttered. "A posse will be roaming around here before long. We can grab Duprey tonight, an' I reckon we can make him talk!"

"Keno!" Hickman nodded. He eyed

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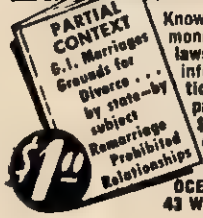

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Jay. "We'll take the gal with us. But I don't see no reason for botherin' with these other two no longer. An' I ain't forgot who it was that sent me to that hell-hole in Yuma. I've dreamed more'n once of how you'd look, Tallant, as I sent a bullet into yore guts. Now I'll find out."

Sam Hickman raised his gun.

He meant to murder Jay in cold blood. Bessie uttered a faint, choken cry and tried to hurl herself from the saddle at him, but she was too far away.

Then a harsh, toneless voice, spoke from the rim of the low bluff above them.

"Look up here, you devil."

THE outlaw whirled and stared up at a man on the rim. Fremont Tallant, his face stern and gray, peered down over the sights of a six-shooter.

Hickman, with a curse swung his gun. Then from Fremont Tallant's hand came a roaring gust of powder flame. The bullet took Sam Hickman squarely between the eyes, smashing the life from him even as he stood there. His gun exploded as he went down, twitching, in the death throes.

With frenzied curses the remaining five were drawing and leaping from the saddles. Fremont Tallant fired twice more with methodical speed. An outlaw toppled from the saddle with a groan. A second man who had leaped to the snow was hammered back as though felled by a sledge.

Three guns roared at the head and shoulders there on the bluff a hundred feet away. Fremont Tallant staggered.

And now a second gun spoke on the bluff at a point a dozen feet to the right of the old grim cattleman. An outlaw dropped with a smashed shoulder.

Fremont Tallant steadied, and lifted his gun again, bearing his sights down on the remaining two who were retreating toward the brush, seeking cover. Relentlessly he shot one down.

The lone survivor turned at bay. Half-sobbing he crouched, steadying his aim with cornered desperation on the merciless avenger there on the rim. Again that second gun spat from the snowy rim. The last of the Sam Hickman outlaw bunch took a staggering step, and plunged forward on his face.

It was over. Six men, dead, dying or wounded, lay in the blood-stained snow there. And Fremont Tallant slowly crumpled to his knees.

Jay saw the jumper-clad form of his sister leap from a prone position on the rim, and run to his father's side. "Jay," she screamed at him. "Dad's been wounded!"

Somehow, with his bound hands, Jay scaled the cutbank. And Bessie and Buck Sevier were at his heels. Fremont Tallant lay in the snow, his head in Jane's lap. She was trying to stem the gush of blood from a wound in his chest.

"I saw those masked men galloping past the house with you three," Jane panted hurriedly. "Dad was staying there at the house with me. We got horses and followed. We didn't have time to bring any others to help. Oh, Jay! He's dying!"

Buck Sevier had knelt beside Jane. "Yore dad's been hit hard," Buck muttered. "Drilled clean through the body, but I don't believe it got his lungs. Cut us free, Jane. Our hands are tied. You'll find a knife in my pocket."

Fremont Tallant's eyes opened. He looked only at Jay. The austere hardness had melted from his face. There was a plea for forgiveness in his eyes.

"I heard," he gasped haltingly. "I heard why you did it. The blame is mine. I don't deserve to have as fine a son as you. Can you forget the fool things I did, Jay? I've been so narrow, so blind I made my own children fear me—made them afraid to come to me with their troubles—unable to turn to me in their hour of need, and ask for help."

Jay took his father's hands. "You're talking of things that never existed, dad," he said. "I've come back home. You're

not going to die—we're all going to start to live again!"

Fremont Tallant smiled. Jay arose. "I'll go to Big Lodge and bring a doctor and a wagon," he said.

Buck Sevier looked at him, then looked closer, his eyes sharpening. He rose. "I'll drift along with him, too," he said. "I reckon you two girls can manage."

It was Fremont Tallant who understood. He smiled a little. "May God protect both of you!" he said. "Sevier, I have been your enemy. I deserve your scorn and contempt. This isn't your fight now. You owe no such debt to us."

Buck looked at Jay, and then his glance strayed to Jane. "Maybe I'd like to make it my fight, too," he said.

Bessie and Jane comprehended then. They both knew that the two grimfaced men meant to find Jules Duprey after they had started help on the way to this blood-stained spot. A fearful protest leaped into their eyes, but knowing how useless it was, they remained silent.

The two men came into Big Lodge on lathered horses. An excited knot of men milled around the front of the jail where a deputy was organizing a posse.

They pulled up their horses, and the crowd stared in frozen amazement as they were recognized. The startled deputy made a motion toward his gun.

Jay shook his head. "Never mind the gun," he said. "Round up a couple of doctors, and some wagons an' ambulances. You'll find Fremont Tallant wounded up along Paint Creek, about half a mile this side of Smoke Butte. And half a dozen dead an' wounded outlaws. The wounded might be able to tell a lot about some of these recent holdups."

They rode on toward the Red Rocket. The deputy, dumbfounded, hesitated a moment, then followed on foot. Jay punched open the door of the Red Rocket and strode in, with Buck at his heels.

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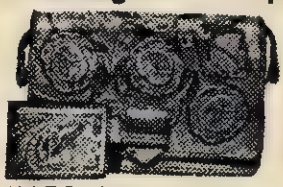

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AT THIS hour the honkytonk was quiet. Most of the gambling tables were covered. A freeze-out poker game was still going down the room. Not more than a dozen patrons were scattered around.

An armed look-out man saw them, and turned hurriedly toward a rear door.

"Hold it," Jay said. "Don't bother to tell Duprey we're here. We'll do that."

The paid fighting-man paused an instant, weighing his course. He decided to fight, and dug for his gun. Jay shot him, walked down the length of the room, and stepped over his body.

As he reached for the knob on the door, a six-shooter crashed beyond it, and the slug came through the panel, throwing resinous splinters into Jay's face.

Behind him he heard Buck's gun let go followed instantly by the deafening crash of a shotgun. The buckshot ripped a hole in the roof.

Buck's voice came reassuringly. "It was the barkeep. I got him. All clear at your back, Jay."

Jay threw his weight at the door, and the lock snapped. As he drove in, a gun gushed flame at him from the darkened room.

He glimpsed a shadowy form, and triggered twice. He could almost feel the impact of his bullets in a man's body.

"Sacré!" a blood-choked voice gasped.

Jules Duprey, in a jacket of fox-fur, lay gasping out his life on the floor. He lay in front of a little iron safe, which stood open. At Duprey's feet were two bars of bullion, and in the safe were more. He had been storing them in leather packsacks.

The gambler looked up at Jay with a twisted smile. "I kill you, and you do not stay dead. Now you kill me. I made the mistake when I do not fire the *coup de grâce.*"

Jules Duprey died there, smiling mirthlessly at life and death. A gambler's smile frozen on his thin lips.

THUNDERCLOUD range was greening up once again. Spring, with all its soft promise of new life, soothed the land.

Fremont Tallant, winning his way back to health after a long fight, sat on the deep porch of the big Tumbling T ranch house, rolling a cigar in his teeth.

He watched the chuckwagon rumble in from the calf roundup, and there was deep pride in his eyes as he followed the movements of the sinewy, red-headed rider who came at the head of the noisy cowboys.

"Bessie!" he shouted into the house. "Here's your husband!"

He chuckled as his new daughter-in-law came eagerly to his side, to rest a hand on his shoulder while she shyly awaited the care-free rusty-haired cowboy who strode toward the house to take her in his arms.

And through the balmy dusk he watched two lingering riders, on slow-moving horses, crawling reluctantly toward the house. They rode close together. He knew that out there, Buck Sevier was holding Jane's hand.

"There's going to be another wedding before long," he said aloud. And his weathered, rock-like face softened into a smile of peace and contentment as he lifted up his eyes again to towering Thundercloud. ★★★

THE CLASSIC CHOWTIME CALL of the range was merely, "Come an' get it." One place, they say, this didn't get prompt enough action to suit the cook. His modified version produced results, became popular. It bears repeating—though barely! It was, "Grab it now, or I'll spit in the skillet."

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(Continued from page 38)

"Prison? Disgrace? A firing squad? All because of the bottle and cards."

Guns rattled steadily up the canyon. Crocker looked at Forrest. "Let me go, Leaton."

"I can't."

Crocker pointed up the canyon. "Up there. I can't go back to face my fellow officers now."

Forrest hesitated. He nodded his head. "Go on, captain," he said quietly. He watched Crocker swing up on his gray and draw his Colt. For a moment he seemed almost the man he must have been many years ago before whiskey and cards had destroyed his career. Then he was gone. In a few minutes the firing increased and then died away. Forrest went back to the wagons. Corporal Kelly led up his wounded horse. There was an odd look on his face. "The captain is dead," he said slowly, "Rode right into the running Pinalenos. Almost as though he wanted to die."

Delehan looked at Forrest. "Maybe he did. What are your orders, sir?"

"Sir?" Kelly looked at Forrest. "Who is he?" he asked. "Is he an officer?"

Delehan grinned. "I know a West Pointer when I see one. Am I right, Mister Gaines?"

Forrest nodded. "We'll get the command back to Fort Shattuck. My job is done."

"Crocker, Stanley and Sabin," said Delehan quietly, "The slate is clean. I always thought they were behind the death of Mister Burris."

Forrest watched the troopers come back and load the wounded into the wagons. The job was done. A line command would be his. He could pick and choose, but somehow he knew he would ask for the command of lonely Fort Shattuck. He wanted to change it from an outpost of fear and corruption into a post of honor. It was all he could do to erase the filth brought on the service by men such as Crocker and Stanley. "Boots and saddles," he said to Kelly, "I'll take over the command, corporal."

Delehan grinned. "A pleasure, sir. A pleasure." ★ ★ ★

(Continued from page 48)

hands off me or you'll be sorry . . ."

"After you turn your pockets."

Todd backhanded Whit across the face. Whit struck back and both twins rushed.

Whit stepped back quickly as they reached him, grabbed a bull neck in each hand. Their momentum turned the trick; he merely supplied the aim. The twins butted heads and sat down with a force that rattled the windows.

Clete and Cash watched as Whit extracted a small roll of bills tied with white string from Todd's pocket.

He handed the money to Laura, and she saw the message in his eyes. For an instant her own eyes were cool, remote; then her eyes changed. "You want me to come back?"

"I was wrong," Whit said simply. "I guess I'm not worth coming back to; but I want you to come back."

He saddled the paint and they rode back together. When they reached the house, she lighted lamps and started a fire in the stove while Whit watered and quartered the horses and washed up.

When he came into the kitchen there was a small roll of bills beside his plate. Twenty-five dollars. He knew what it was for. With Cash, she had never had anything she could call her own. In this house, she had felt like a bonded servant. Now by her own efforts, she had paid her bond.

She came to the table to serve supper. "I think you ought to burn that old ticking in the loft," she said. "We won't be needing it unless we have company sometime." ★ ★ ★

(Continued from page 71)

running from what I had been, and any other name but mine, I thought, would help me get away. Now . . . I know running is useless. Soltau and his men recognized me for what I was; men will always do that. My life is ruined. And you'll not ruin yours out of any foolish notion of granting me pity!"

"It isn't foolish, and it isn't pity. You're right, running away is never any good. Standing and making a new life for yourself is. It won't be easy. Nothing ever is, in this country. But I'll be beside you, all the way. Come home with me!"

"Wayne, don't tempt me with such words! The kind of woman I've been is not for you!"

"What was in me when I rode after Soltau's wagons was worse than anything you could ever have done," he said. "The past is dead, for both of us, right here." And then, "I've a nice place; you'll like it. We're going to spend a lot of years there together."

He saw wonderment in her upturned face, and a dawning radiance. She came with a rush into his arms. He kissed the cool sweetness of her lips.

There was a startled roar from Coker: "Those Tonkawas didn't report a woman here! If I'd known that, I would have called the whole thing off!"

Then the captain was coming toward them. He would have to be introduced. That would be an awkward moment—not easy, as he had warned. Nothing would be easy, for a long time to come. But, standing together, they would make out.

Together they had looked at death.

He smiled and kissed Alice Grimes again, and held her a moment longer before they took their first step into the future. The bright Comanche moon, meaning no longer, seemed to smile benignly on them. ★ ★ ★

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Death Canyon

By Howard L. Karp

BILL and Bob McAfee, twin brothers, were making their way down to Saint Louis to celebrate a successful winter of prospecting. Towards evening they began looking for a place to camp. Bob sighted a dense grove of trees, and they set off for them.

When they got there, though, Bill was dubious. "Look at all the dead trees amongst the live ones," he said. "It don't look so good to me."

"Aw, don't be such a yellow belly," Bob said. "What can happen to us here?" But Bill was looking around. He noticed that the river bluffs came pretty close together and rose almost vertically.

"This here ain't no valley," he said. "It's a cañon."

"Well, I never heard such belly achin' from you before," Bob said. "What's got into you?"

"I don't know," Bill said. "But there's something about this place that I don't like. It'd be a hell of a place to be in if it stormed."

Halfway through the night, they were awakened by a roar that sounded as if heaven and earth were coming together: it was a mighty clap of thunder. There was a moment of calm, and then a mountain of air came roaring down the cañon. The cañon was, in fact, a natural tunnel and the wind and the rain engulfed them with a mighty roar. Bill ran behind a huge green tree flanked on either side by dead trees. pressure. He could hear the crash of trees over the wind. For two hours the storm raged and then as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. Bill stayed behind the tree, exhausted, until dawn.

The cañon was a ravaged jungle now. Nowhere cuold he see Bob. He yelled and shouted, and finally he heard a faint response. That can't be Bob, he thought. It sounds like a kid—a sick kid. Bill yelled again and again the feeble cry answered him. Finally Bill found him.

Bob lay on his back; his legs were crushed beneath a huge tree trunk. Bill tried to lift it.

"Don't be a fool," Bob said. "A hundred men couldn't lift that. There's only one thing you can do for me."

"What is it?" Bill asked eagerly.

"Take that six-gun there and shoot me.

"I can't do it, Bob," Bill cried. "You're my brother. I'd never know any peace after this if I did."

"Do you want me to die like this—by inches. If you love me, Bill, you'll do what I ask. Let me die like a man. Look up there." He pointed up to the sky which was full of wheeling buzzards. "Do you want me to die looking at them? If you won't do it, give me the gun. I been trying to get at it all night. But—please, Bill. Do it for me."

Bill looked at the sky, and then he took the gun. "Goodbye, Bob," he said. And he put the bullet neatly through his brother's head.

Two weeks later when he got into town, he was a raving madman. The only thing he could say was, "I killed him." He was put in the county hospital where he lived in constant, tortured remorse for five more years. Just before he died, he told the whole story.

And when they buried him in the town boothill, on the marker they put these words: *He's Going Where Motives Count More Than Deeds.* ★ ★ ★

(Continued from page 27)

"You take after your old man, Dean," Vail said harshly. "You're just too damned smart. So I'm going to give you the same medicine I gave him five years ago. A dose of hot lead!"

"Hold it!" Welsh said sharply. "This calls for another accident, Marty. A killer trying to get away from the law. His horse stumbles, and he falls off the trail. Get the picture?"

Vail grinned. "Yeah, I get it. We'll—"

A sound from inside the stone building stopped him.

"I've heard enough," Sheriff Lund said, and he and Joe Foote stepped through the doorway.

Vail's gun lifted, blasted; and the deputy staggered back.

Tommy went for his gun. But Lund's gun was already up and blasting. Tommy saw Vail clutch at a ragged hole in his chest and try to stay on his feet.

Lund's gun spoke once again. With a gasping cough, the big rancher sank to the ground. The sheriff's gun swung toward the banker.

"Don't shoot!" Welsh screamed.

Tommy reached out and took the gun from the man's bony hand.

"I guess that does it, Tommy," Lund said. "After this, I reckon you won't be so unwelcome in the basin country."

Walking toward the Triangle house, he felt scared. His heart was hammering like sixty. Then he glanced up and saw Stella standing in the doorway, waiting for him, her red lips smiling, her eyes a little misty. Suddenly he wasn't scared at all.

"John was in town when the sheriff returned with those men," she said. "I know the whole story, Tommy."

And the sudden twinkle in her blue eyes told him she knew about everything. So he didn't waste any more time with words. He took her in his arms and kissed her. ★ ★ ★

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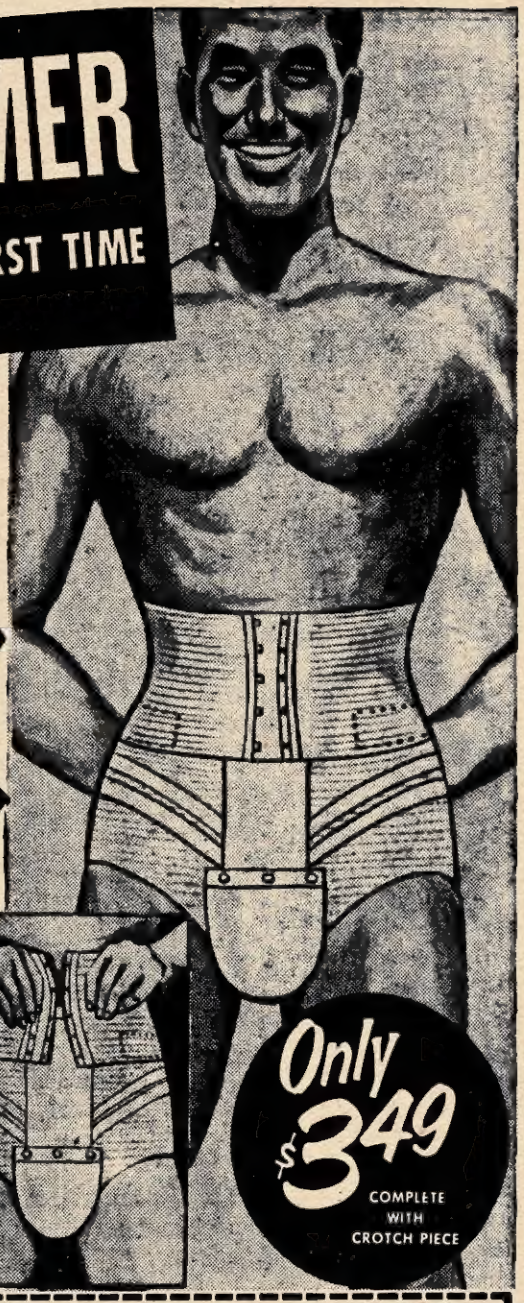

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—Continued from back cover

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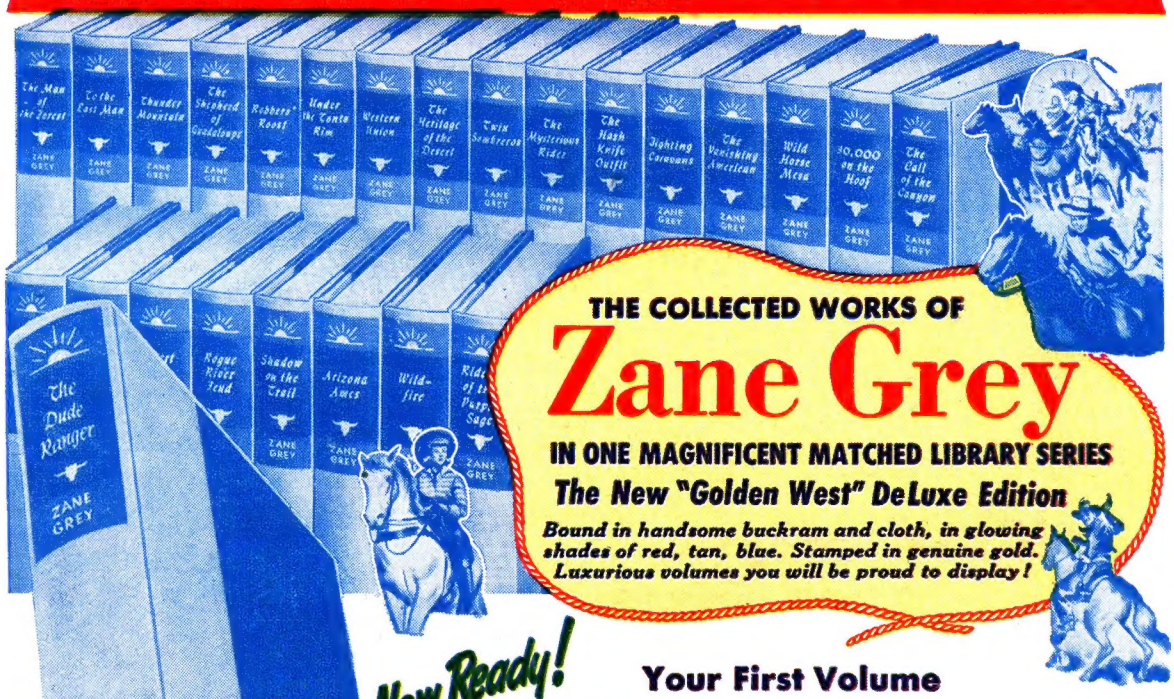

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